



Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture

THIRD EDITION

William H. Stiebing Jr. | Susan N. Hefft



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ROUTLEDGE

Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture

Organized by the periods, kingdoms, and empires generally used in ancient Near Eastern political history, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* interlaces social and cultural history with a political narrative. Charts, figures, maps, and historical documents introduce the reader to the material world of the ancient Near East, including Egypt. The emphasis on historical debates and areas of uncertainty helps students understand how historians use evidence to create interpretations and that several different interpretations of history are possible.

New features in this edition include:

- Reorganization of the chapters on the early periods, with discussions incorporating the latest archaeological finds.
- New “Debating the Evidence” sections discussing current controversial issues in Near Eastern history. These sections make it easy for students and teachers to find and use the portions of the text devoted to scholarly arguments about various aspects of ancient Near Eastern history.
- A new chapter, “Ancient Israel and Judah,” has been added to cover more completely the crucial issues of ancient Israelite history and religion.
- More emphasis has been placed on the role and contributions of women in the ancient Near East.

The most important change is the addition of co-author Susan N. Helft, a specialist in the art and archaeology of the ancient Near East, who has applied her considerable knowledge, insight, research, and editing skills throughout the book. This new edition of *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* will remain a crucial text for students beginning to learn about the fascinating civilizations of the Near East.

William H. Stiebing Jr. is Seraphia Leyda Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of New Orleans, USA.

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Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture

Third Edition

William H. Stiebing Jr. and Susan N. Helt

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To Ann, My Wife, Best Friend and Fount of Inspiration; and to the
Memory of Our Daughter, Kimberly (Kira) Heston.—WHS

To Josh and My Children, with Love and Appreciation.—SNH

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Introduction

Studying the Ancient Near East

The Near East is the area where the earliest civilizations yet known originated. But what area is subsumed under the designation “the Near East”? What sources of information do historians have for reconstructing its early history and chronology? We must cover such preliminary matters before describing what is known and unknown about the ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

A Note on Chronological Terminology

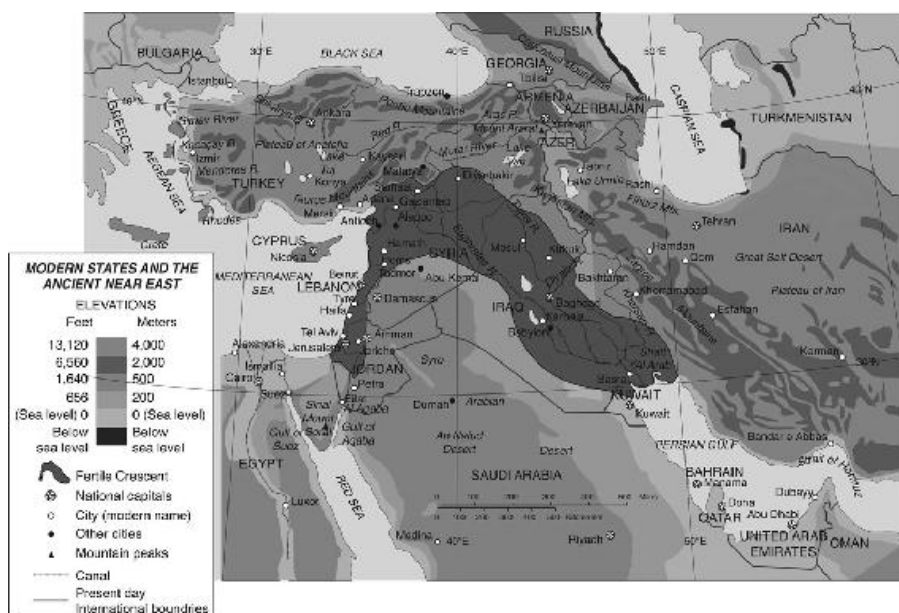
It has long been customary in the West to date events BC (“Before Christ”) or AD (*Anno Domini*, “in the Year of Our Lord”) in relation to the supposed date for the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus Christ as Christians call him. In recent decades many have used an alternate, more inclusive terminology: BCE (“Before the Common Era”) and CE (“the Common Era”) that represent the same time periods as BC and AD, respectively. We will use the BCE and CE designations for dates in this text. When considering events before the traditional date for the birth of Jesus, the student must get used to counting backwards to date events. For instance, 1800 BCE is two hundred years *earlier* than 1600 BCE.

What Is the “Near East”?

This book is an introduction to the ancient history and culture (c. 3500–330 BCE) of an area that scholars of antiquity call the Near East. This large territory includes **Asia Minor** (Turkey), the **Levant** (Syria west of the Euphrates, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan),¹ Egypt, coastal areas of Arabia, **Mesopotamia** (the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the region between them, essentially modern-day Iraq and Syria east of the Euphrates), and the Iranian

plateau. It extends from the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas on the west to Afghanistan and Pakistan on the east; from the Black Sea, Caucasus Mountains, Caspian Sea, and Turkmeni-*stan* on the north to the first Nile **cataract**, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf on the south. This is an area almost as wide as the continental United States and much larger than Europe (see [Map Intro.1](#)). It naturally has much diversity in terrain, climate, and culture.

This large region has at times been called by several other names: the ancient Orient, the Middle East, or western Asia and Egypt. From the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries CE, when European nations were just “discovering” the lands and cultures of China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia, the term “Orient” or “East” generally referred to the region we are calling the Near East. Even during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries CE, the “Orient” in the name of the famous Orient Express train referred to Turkey, because Istanbul was its final destination. The Christmas carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are” alluded to **magi**



[Map 1.1](#) The Near East—Modern State Borders

traveling from Persia or Mesopotamia, not from China or Japan. As the more distant Asian lands became better known, they became the “Far East,” and the old Orient or East became the “Near East.”

The “Middle East” is a term developed in the twentieth century CE to designate most of the area that formerly had been the Ottoman Turkish Empire. It usually includes the countries of Asia west of Afghanistan and

Pakistan. Thus, it corresponds generally with the area covered in this book. However, the term is also often applied to those lands that are primarily Islamic in culture. When used in this way, it includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Egypt. Sometimes, the term even includes the Muslim nations of North Africa (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). This dual meaning might make it useful for modern political analysis, but “Middle East” is too ambiguous a designation for use by historians. So, although news reporters, politicians, and political scientists have adopted the use of “Middle East,” scholars studying ancient civilizations generally have not.

In recent decades, American schools have been providing better coverage of African states and civilizations. As part of that emphasis, educators have stressed Egypt’s position in Africa and its role as an African culture. Also, ancient Egypt was more self-contained and its culture somewhat more parochial than those of the other Near Eastern nations. Thus, some scholars have preferred to speak of western Asia and Egypt rather than the Near East. Geographically, that terminology is correct. However, in antiquity, Egypt was related economically, diplomatically, and to a degree culturally to the societies of western Asia. While it also had similar connections with Nubia to the south and lesser ones with Libya to the west, it had few affiliations with the rest of Africa. Most students of ancient cultures have continued to consider ancient Egypt an integral part of the Near East. Furthermore, the designation “Near East” is shorter and less cumbersome than “western Asia and Egypt.” Therefore, the Near East has remained a viable scholarly designation for the region even though it includes parts of two continents and its outer boundaries are somewhat fluid.

In ancient times, trade routes crisscrossed the Near East, keeping the various cultures and civilizations of the area in touch with one another. In addition, there was extensive trade and contact with other cultures on the fringes of the Near East. Urban civilizations that developed in south-central Asia and the Indus valley maintained trade relations with Mesopotamia in the third and second millennia BCE, as did Persian Gulf cultures around Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. The Nubians not only traded with Egypt, but also often were subjects of the Egyptian Empire. For a time, they even reversed the situation and became Egypt’s masters. The Aegean civilizations that developed in Crete and mainland Greece not only had close relations with the peoples of Asia Minor, but also carried on extensive trade with Egypt, Cyprus, Palestine, and Syria. Thus, though most of these neighboring areas and cultures are not usually considered part of the ancient Near East, we will have to give some attention to them in this work.

Geography and Environment

An important feature of the ancient Near East is the degree of geographic variation within the region. Understanding the basic topographical and environmental features of this vast area provides insight into the development of its civilizations and culture. Stretching between two seas, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, the region can be roughly divided into four general zones: mountains and high plateaus, river valleys, and desert or semi-desert. Of these, conditions in the two major river valleys (Egypt and Mesopotamia) initially aided in creating the most advanced and successful civilizations.

Egypt, which lies at the very southwestern edge of the Near Eastern sphere, has a unique environment. The Nile River defines life in Egypt. Sitting at the eastern edge of the Sahara, Egypt is literally an oasis in the midst of desert. Settled life and agriculture are possible only within the limits of the Nile's narrow floodplain. On average this plain was one-half-mile wide. At its edges, where the floods do not reach, the fields give way to vast stretches of sand. Along its north-south axis, ancient Egypt extended from the mouth of the Nile at the Mediterranean in the north to the first **cataract** (shallow rapids) of the Nile at Aswan, a total of approximately 700 miles. Just north of modern-day Cairo, the Nile splits into numerous branches forming a lush marshy river delta before it spills into the Mediterranean Sea. This area was agriculturally productive but also gave Egypt access to the larger Mediterranean. In general, Egypt was blessed with good natural resources. The predictable annual inundation of the Nile at seeding time (in the autumn) created productive harvests with minimal investments of labor and a fairly dependable food supply. The marshes in the north and oases to the west of Egypt provided an abundance of waterfowl, fish, wildlife, and flora such as papyrus, flax, and date palms. Large outcroppings of limestone, granite, and basalt as well as semiprecious stones and gold in the desert provided Egypt with reasonable resources for building, monuments, and luxuries.

To the northeast of Egypt lie the Mediterranean coastlands of the Levant (modern-day Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon). This region is considered somewhat of a marginal zone. Much of the region receives enough rainfall for farming without irrigation, but rainfall could fluctuate widely and crop yields were therefore unpredictable. On the other hand, the northern Levant was famous in antiquity for its rich cedar forests (the famed Cedars of Lebanon), whose trees were used extensively for roofing palaces and temples around the Near East. In addition, the milder Mediterranean climate provided a unique set of products for the larger Near Eastern market, especially olives, grapes, and grains. With few desirable resources, the Levant's main importance was as a

corridor for goods, ideas, and armies between the more powerful countries of Egypt and Mesopotamia. When long-distance shipping evolved in the second and first millennia BCE, the harbors of the northern Levant also served as the gateway to the Near East, opening the east to the rest of the regions situated around the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout the history of the ancient Near East, this area was a contested zone subject to the powers of Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Asia Minor.

Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers, was the true heartland of the ancient Near East. Located in modern Iraq, this region today looks like a hot, dry, dusty plain, but this was not the case in antiquity. Like Egypt, the lifeblood of Mesopotamia were the two rivers that define its territory. The Euphrates and Tigris Rivers both begin in the Anatolian highlands of modern Turkey and make their way through modern Syria and Iraq, eventually joining together in southern Iraq and emptying into the Persian Gulf. Before the modern construction of dams, annual flooding of the rivers deposited a rich alluvial soil on the valley floor. However, unlike Egypt, the flooding season in Mesopotamia was in the spring during harvest time (April-May). The floods were essential to deposit mineral rich soil along the riverbanks, but had to be controlled. Mesopotamia does not receive any rainfall in the long dry summer months, but agriculture is possible with the extensive use of irrigation canals. As lower Mesopotamia is extremely flat, harnessing the river water in canals was relatively easy. The low river gradient, however, also meant that the river channels sometimes shifted and canals could get clogged, literally leaving settlements high and dry. Therefore, settlements often shifted in Mesopotamia, leaving behind the desolate mounds we see today which are called **tells**. To the west of Mesopotamia lay impassable desert that stretches almost to the Mediterranean. To the east are the hilly uplands that turn into the Zagros Mountains and the Iranian Plateau. The rivers, therefore, were also vital as the main transportation arteries connecting Mesopotamian settlements to one another and to the rest of the Near East.

Mesopotamia was part of a larger arc of regions known as the Fertile Crescent (see [Map 1.1](#)). In fact, as you follow the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers upstream, you move into the arid steppes of Syria and the mountains that separate the river plains from the high Anatolian Plateau. Syria is crisscrossed by small river systems that continue the arc of agriculturally viable land towards the Mediterranean. The steppe and hilly flanks to the north of this arc receive enough rainfall to support agricultural communities in this area as well. These steppe and mountain valleys had resources that were essential to lower-lying communities. The resources of the Mesopotamian lowlands were few, consisting of clay, wheat and barley, bitumen (a tar-like substance used as an adhesive and waterproofing), date palms, and reeds. The hills of the Zagros

and the Taurus Mountains provided metal ores, stones, pasturage, and trees of various sorts. Contacts between highlands and lowlands was an essential aspect of the development of the entire region.

It is important to remember that the landscape of the ancient Near East was quite different from that found today, especially in Mesopotamia. Over the last millennia, deforestation of the hills of the Zagros and Lebanon, the movement of river channels, and the natural accumulation of salts in the soils have turned southern Iraq into a dry, unproductive plain. In the extreme south, where the Tigris and Euphrates come together, there once stretched a vast area of wetland marshes. Until Saddam Hussein drained it in the 1970s CE, this area provided an abundance of fish and water fowl as well as reeds, all of which were utilized by early Mesopotamians.

The surrounding regions, the periphery of the ancient Near East, provided a different geographic setting and set of resources. In many ways the southwestern plains of Iran are a continuation of Mesopotamia. The two areas were in close contact throughout antiquity and this area gave access to the interior of Iran. To the north across the Taurus Mountains were the uplands of Anatolia. This region was cooler and wetter, had metal and timber, but was harder to access. The history of the ancient Near East is therefore the story of individual societies conditioned by their particular topography, climate, and resources. It is this environmental differentiation that was also the impetus for the integration of these regions into the larger cultural and economic system that we call the ancient Near East.

Antiquity's "Clues"

At times, historians have argued whether historical study of antiquity should be classified as a science or an art. However, it does not really seem to be either, though it has elements of both. Perhaps the best category for ancient history is not science or art, but detective work. Like detectives, historians of the ancient world must develop logical explanations of past events using only incomplete bits of evidence or clues. They must gather all the evidence they can, striving to understand its original contexts, purposes, and limitations. Then, from the fragmentary evidence, they must carefully and imaginatively arrange the events into a meaningful pattern (Thomas and Wick 1994; Marius 1998: 11–12).

Furthermore, historians, like detectives, frequently disagree about what is the most logical reconstruction of events, especially when the evidence is

sparse. Sometimes a new piece of evidence shows that even a generally accepted reconstruction is wrong (or very unlikely). So, in the material that follows, especially in the “Debating the Evidence” sections, areas of disagreement are noted and conflicting reconstructions or interpretations described. In contradiction to the view of history as a recitation of “facts,” such controversies are a necessary part of historical study.

Historians studying ancient times usually must work with material from two different sources: archaeology and written texts. Archaeology is a field of study distinguished by its methodology and the specific things it studies. Archaeology attempts to reconstruct the human past through the discovery and analysis of its material remains or **artifacts**. Anything that has been made, altered, or used by humans or which owes its position in space to humans is an artifact. Buildings, pottery, and metal tools are examples of artifacts. However, so too are seashells that people carried away from a beach, or natural stones that they piled on top of graves or hurled at animals or enemies. Careful excavation and analysis of such remains provides important information about vanished cultures that can be used by scholars in many different fields, especially in anthropology and history. In fact, in the United States archaeology is usually considered a part of anthropology, while in Europe it is usually more closely associated with history. We must always remember, though, that like historical study, archaeological analysis of finds requires interpretation and therefore involves some subjectivity. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, archaeologists often disagree about the interpretation of **strata** (an archaeological level) within mounds and of artifacts that have been found just as historians disagree about the meaning of their data. Nevertheless, archaeology provides information that we would not be able to get from other sources. Texts rarely describe houses, bowls, graves, tools, weapons, and other common aspects of everyday life. Historians also can use archaeological evidence to support or challenge statements in texts (which, as we will see, cannot always be taken at face value). Finally, archaeology also has provided historians with long-lost texts such as ancient inscriptions, clay tablets, and papyrus scrolls. Because of the importance of such materials, most historians of the ancient Near East are also trained in archaeology, anthropology, and several ancient languages.

Archaeological evidence is valuable, but written material is at the heart of any historical investigation. In fact, the appearance of written records is used to distinguish the historical era proper from prehistory. However, texts from the past are like statements that witnesses and suspects make to modern detectives. They often provide the clearest and best evidence for a reconstruction of past events. A good detective, however, knows that some of his witnesses may be mistaken, lying, or telling only part of the truth. In the

same way, historians must carefully analyze their textual evidence to determine its relevance and its reliability.

Much of the written evidence historians of ancient times must use is the equivalent of what our legal system calls “hearsay.” It comes from writers who lived long after the events that they relate and often contains much local folklore and tradition that may or may not be accurate. Furthermore, sometimes the level of “hearsay” between the “witness” and the original event is even greater. The writings of some ancient authors survive only in quotations from their work by other ancient figures. The history of Egypt written by Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the early third century BCE, is known only through such quotations. The same is true for the work of the Hellenistic Babylonian priest, Berossus. Thus, not only were these authors writing long after the events they were describing, but we also have the added problem of trying to decide whether or not they were quoted correctly. Obviously, the historian has to analyze such sources with great care and seek independent substantiation of their testimony from archaeology or other texts.

Even writings that are contemporary with the events they describe must be carefully scrutinized for bias or possible distortions of the truth. Royal inscriptions and chronicles may lie or exaggerate in order to glorify the ruler or the gods. The author of a personal letter may have misunderstood or misrepresented contemporary events. Some texts may describe ideals more than reality. Because of these limitations, the most reliable information often comes from analysis of writings that were not intended to provide historical data. Personal business records, lists of temple personnel, transcripts of legal proceedings, and other “nonhistorical” documents often provide the historian with valuable clues about the times and societies in which they were produced. Occasionally, such materials also provide information about major historical figures or events.

The greatest difficulty faced by the historian of the ancient Near East, however, is the spotty nature of the evidence. Only a small portion of the material that once existed now survives, and only a portion of that surviving material has been recovered for study. The “clues” we have are often very inadequate. Nevertheless, by painstaking testing, analysis, and correlation of the evidence provided by archaeology and written sources, historians have been able to plausibly reconstruct the ancient Near Eastern world. Naturally, this construct is only tentative. At any time, the discovery of new evidence could change it. Also, changes in historians’ assumptions, concerns, and interests constantly lead them to seek out new evidence or to ask new questions of old evidence. Thus, the process of discovering and explaining the past never ends.

Creating a Chronology for the Ancient Near East

Absolute and Relative Chronology

Because historians attempt to understand the development and change of cultures and institutions through time, chronology is important. We usually think of chronology in terms of dates—the U.S. Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776 CE, or Columbus first landed in the New World in 1492 CE. However, such dates are examples of only one type of chronology, known as **absolute chronology**. Absolute chronology counts years from a specific point of reference. The dates 1776 and 1492 CE, for example, are based on the supposed date for the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. We are used to such precise dates for events in our own time, and we would like to have them for events in the past. However, it is often difficult to date events that occurred more than 400 or 500 years before the time of Jesus with such precision. And for the prehistoric period, the time before the development of writing, precise absolute dates for human events are impossible (Aitken 1990).

Many events and periods of antiquity can be dated only in terms of their order or sequence. We call this type of dating **relative chronology**. This is the kind of chronology usually produced by archaeological excavations. As archaeologists uncover ancient settlements, they usually find the remains of buildings constructed atop the vestiges of still earlier structures, layer upon layer. The sequence of a site's layers of remains or strata is known as its stratification, and the analysis of stratification is called **stratigraphy**. The material in the layer at the bottom of a mound is earlier than that in the layers above it (the “law of superposition”). Pits dug into a site are later than the layers they cut through. We may not know exactly when any one of the layers was created, but their sequence allows us to place the objects they contain in proper chronological order in relation to one another.

Archaeologists can extend a stratigraphical sequence from one mound, or **tell** (the Arabic term for a mound), to entire cultural regions by comparing the assemblages found in the layers of one mound with those of others in the region. An archaeological **assemblage** is a group of objects found in association with each other, thought to be contemporaneous and belonging to one group of people. For example, if archaeologists uncover certain types of pottery, weapons, and other artifacts in Stratum 2 (counting from the top) of one mound and an assemblage of the same types of artifacts in Stratum 6 of

another mound, they can assume that these two strata are roughly contemporaneous. Such comparisons allow them to create sequences of cultural phases or periods (defined by their archaeological assemblages) for entire cultures.

Fortunately, archaeological assemblages and sequences can often be provided with generalized absolute dates by noting relationships with Egypt or Mesopotamia (and later with Greece, Rome, and other areas). Scholars have developed at least an approximate absolute chronology for areas that had many written texts, including king lists and astronomical observations (see the next section). So, Palestinian objects found in Egypt and Egyptian and Mesopotamian objects found in Palestinian archaeological deposits allow us to provide approximate dates for the Palestinian archaeological assemblages and sequences.

Furthermore, over the past half century, science has provided archaeologists with additional ways to date the past (Aitken 1990; Grün and Roberts (eds.) 2015). The best known and most useful of these scientific dating techniques is **radiocarbon dating** (also known as **carbon-14 dating** or C14 dating), developed by physicist Willard Libby just after World War II. All living things contain carbon, and it was learned that a very small but fixed proportion of that carbon is the radioactive isotope of carbon, ^{14}C . As long as an organism is alive, the carbon it contains has the same proportion of radioactive carbon as the carbon in the atmosphere. However, when an organism dies, it ceases to receive new carbon-14, and the radioactive carbon it already contains gradually decays into nitrogen. So the ratio of carbon-14 to normal carbon decreases as time passes. It takes $5,730 \pm 40$ years for half of the radioactive carbon in an object to become nitrogen, another $5,730 \pm 40$ years for half of the remaining ^{14}C to decay, and so on. Scientists determine the percentage of radioactive carbon remaining in organic material found in archaeological deposits and compare it with the percentage in presently living organisms. They then can calculate how long the ^{14}C has been decaying and thus, how long ago the organism in question died. This dating method can provide at least general absolute dates for organic objects up to approximately 70,000 years old.²

Dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating, is another scientific dating method that has proved useful to archaeology. Trees add a ring every year and the width of the rings varies according to climatic conditions. Scientists can compare groups of wide and narrow rings in recently cut trees with those in old stumps and beams from the same area to create tree-ring sequences extending far backward in time. In England and the southwestern United States, such sequences stretch back more than 6,000 years. They have been particularly useful as indicators of periods of climatic change and as a means

of correcting radiocarbon dates. By testing selected rings from these tree-ring sequences, scientists can determine whether the radiocarbon date deviates from the true date and if so, by how much. The ratio of carbon-14 to normal carbon has varied over time, so calculations based on the present-day ratio of carbon isotopes were bound to produce somewhat inexact dates for earlier material. Today, based on radiocarbon testing of tree rings, scientists have constructed charts showing the amount of deviation between radiocarbon dates and actual absolute dates. They use these charts to correct radiocarbon dates to more accurately reflect the true age of tested objects up to about 6,000 years old.

Scientists have also developed other methods for dating archaeological remains. Fission-track dating uses microscopic evidence of the fission of trace amounts of a uranium isotope to date glass and inclusions in clay. Archaeomagnetic or paleomagnetic dating obtains dates by comparing the magnetic orientation of particles in clay ovens, burned walls, and other fired materials with past positions of the earth's magnetic pole. **Obsidian** hydration dating determines when a tool made of this volcanic glass was last used by measuring the amount of water its surface layers have absorbed. And thermoluminescence dating determines when clay objects were last fired by measuring the amount of light emitted when they are subjected to high heat. These dating techniques have all been useful, but none is as widely used or is as accurate as tree-ring-corrected radiocarbon dating.

Sources for Ancient Near Eastern Chronology

The chronological framework for ancient Near Eastern history has been developed through careful analysis of many different types of material. Some, like lists of rulers derived from Hittite documents and various texts found at Ebla, Alalakh, and other Syrian cities, provide only relative chronologies. Fortunately, though, absolute dates can be determined for several events mentioned in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources. Trade, diplomatic relationships, and other connections between the various Near Eastern peoples then make it possible for scholars to date other areas by means of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian chronologies.

However, almost all of the absolute dates on which we rely are derived from astronomical observations mentioned in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Hittite texts. This fact makes our chronologies less precise than one might think. Most astronomical phenomena recur in cycles. Often the cycles are short enough that two or three different dates are possible for an astronomical event

mentioned in an ancient text. Other questions arise due to gaps in the records, uncertainty about the length of some kings' reigns, the possible overlapping of some reigns, and similar problems.

The ancient Mesopotamians not only created various king lists, but they also kept lists of year names or designations. In early Mesopotamia, each year was given a specific name such as "the first conquest of Ebla." These names were used to date documents, and lists of them formed a fixed chronology for the area. In Assyria, there was a *limmu* official for each year whose name was used as the year name. The Assyrian *limmu* lists (also known as **eponym** lists) served the same function as earlier year-name lists. Unfortunately, gaps exist between the various year lists. Specialists have reconstructed ancient Mesopotamian chronology from the surviving king and year lists, historical chronicles, inscriptions, and several synchronisms (indications of events that occurred at the same time or of persons who were contemporaries). We are also fortunate to have a list of Babylonian and Alexandrian rulers from Nabonassar to Augustus and the number of years each reigned, which was compiled by Claudius Ptolemy in the second century CE.³ Various textual references to a solar eclipse that occurred in 763 BCE and a lunar eclipse that took place in 523 BCE allow us to provide firm dates for Assyrian rulers and events back to almost 1000 BCE and for the later Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods. However, Mesopotamian chronology for the second and third millennia BCE is uncertain. Fortunately, near the end of the First **Dynasty** of Babylon, Mesopotamian scholars recorded observations of the rising and setting of the planet Venus. However, the movements these tablets document repeat at intervals that alternate between fifty-six and sixty-four years, and thus yield several possible dates for rulers of the First Dynasty of Babylon, including its most famous member, Hammurabi. Today different scholars date the beginning of Hammurabi's reign to 1848, 1792, or 1728 BCE, though most support the middle date. There also is a gap of unknown duration between the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon and the beginning of Kassite rule, and between the end of the Akkadian Empire and the rise of the Third Dynasty of Ur. This means that dates for early Mesopotamia can vary by as much as 200 or 300 years (Hunger 2009).

The basic framework for Egyptian chronology is its dynastic sequence. This arrangement is based on the Hellenistic work of Manetho. However, as previously mentioned, Manetho's history is known only from excerpts included in the writings of later individuals. The ancient Egyptians also made some king lists, one or more of which Manetho probably used to write his history. Unfortunately, only a few fragmentary examples of these lists survive. These include the Turin Royal Canon, a fragmentary list known as the Palermo Stone, the Royal List of Karnak, the Saqqara Table of Kings (on the wall of a

tomb), and the Abydos Table of Kings (on the walls of a temple). We must compare the information found in the excerpts from Manetho with that derived from these surviving king lists, and check both against inscriptions and other documents. In this way, scholars have reconstructed the probable sequence of Egyptian rulers and the approximate lengths of many of their reigns.

Just as in Mesopotamian chronology, absolute dates for ancient Egypt are derived from textual references to astronomical events. Early in their history, the Egyptians created a civil calendar that began with the start of the Nile's flood, or **inundation**. They also soon observed that after a period of invisibility, the star Sirius (Sopdet to the Egyptians, Sothis in Greek) reappeared at about the same time that the inundation commenced. However, the civil calendar was only 365 days long (12 months of 30 days each with 5 extra days at the end of the year) while the actual solar year is about 365 1/4 days long. So, the calendar gradually got out of synchronization with the seasons of the solar year. Only once in every 1,460 years did the rising of Sirius actually take place on the first day of the civil year. Ancient accounts indicate that this event occurred in 139 CE. This reference allows us to calculate the possible absolute dates for Egyptian references to the calendar dates for the rising of Sirius in the seventh year of Senwosret III (Dynasty 12) and in the ninth year of Amenhotep I (Dynasty 18). The Egyptians also used a lunar calendar for determining the times for religious festivals. The Sothic calculations, when correlated with a series of lunar observations from the Twelfth Dynasty, indicate that the seventh year of Senwosret III fell in 1830 BCE. From this date, scholars can calculate the dates for the reigns of the rest of the Middle Kingdom **pharaohs** and provide approximate dates for those of earlier dynasties. A similar calculation indicates that the date for the ninth year of Amenhotep I probably fell between 1508 and 1503 BCE, with 1506 BCE the most likely date. Thus, the inception of Amenhotep I's dynasty (the Eighteenth) is now usually placed around 1540 or 1539 BCE.⁴ From this date, other New Kingdom dates can be worked out.

A series of lunar observations recorded during the reigns of Thutmose III and Ramesses II provides another possible way to date New Kingdom reigns. However, depending on where in Egypt one assumes the observations were made, the date for the beginning of Thutmose III's reign could be 1504, 1490, or 1479 BCE. In recent years, most Egyptologists have come to support the 1479 BCE date, which agrees with 1539 BCE as the most likely date for the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Similarly, Ramesses II could have come to the throne in 1304, 1290, or 1279 BCE, with the evidence favoring 1279 BCE.

Thus, pre-first millennium BCE absolute dates for both Mesopotamia and Egypt are not certain. Yet these are the dates on which the chronologies for

other areas must be based. This history of the ancient Near East uses the absolute dates generally deemed most probable. Nevertheless, most of these “absolute” dates are preceded by c. (an abbreviation for *circa*, meaning “about”) or by the word “approximately,” “around,” “about,” “roughly,” or some other expression of uncertainty.

Notes

1. The term “Levant” for the coastal area of the eastern Mediterranean south of Turkey and north of Egypt derives from the French term *soleil levant*, “the rising sun.” In medieval times, it was used for all areas east of Italy, but it gradually became restricted to the region indicated here.
2. Radiocarbon tests are actually run several times on different samples and then analyzed statistically. The “date” given is really the mean of the dates obtained from testing the several samples. The “plus or minus” number after a date indicates one standard deviation from that mean date. There is a two out of three chance that the correct date falls within one standard deviation from the mean. Thus, a C-14 date of 1570 ± 50 BCE means that there is a 67 percent likelihood that the correct date of the tested sample is between 1620 and 1520 BCE.
3. For a good overview of these sources and how they are used to reconstruct ancient chronology, see Depuydt (2005: 27–33).
4. These calculations and the Egyptian chronology used throughout this work are taken (with only slight deviations here and there) from Hornung et al. (2006), especially pp. 479–482. This chronology is favored by most Egyptologists. However, recent studies using radiocarbon dating of short-lived samples combined with Bayesian modeling indicate that the higher chronology for the Middle Kingdom favored in the past may be correct (Shortland and Bronk Ramsey 2013; Höflmayer 2016). If radiocarbon specialists are able to convince Egyptologists that they are right, the dates for the early Middle Kingdom would have to be raised by about sixty years.

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Near Eastern Prehistory

Southwest Asia in the Late Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Chalcolithic Periods

The Origins of Sedentary Life (c. 12,500–10,200 BCE)

Though human beings emerged on earth some 2.5 to 3 million years ago, settled life, agriculture, civilization, and history are all relatively recent. These developments have all taken place within the past 15,000 years. By that time, our species, *Homo sapiens sapiens* (“doubly wise human,” known in European prehistory as Cro-Magnon Man), had spread throughout the world and totally replaced earlier human species. Today scholars hotly debate the origins, movements, and interconnections of various early types of humans represented in the fossil record (Wenke 1999: 160–167; Zilhao 2000; Hublin 2000). However, fascinating as these arguments are, they are beyond the scope of this book. Our story begins at the end of the last Ice Age when the human way of life began to undergo momentous changes. For thousands of years humans consisted of small migrating bands who survived by hunting and gathering. All that began to change around 12,500 BCE, when humans first created permanent settlements and began the processes of **cultivation** and **domestication** of crops and livestock. Although the processes of change took thousands of years, these changes revolutionized human societies in countless ways and are therefore referred to as the Neolithic (or Agricultural) Revolution. Understanding how and why this revolution took place is one of the more interesting topics of archaeological research.

Following the ideas of archaeologist V. Gordon Childe, many scholars once believed that the change to our present-day climate around 8000 BCE led Near Eastern peoples to domesticate plants and animals. According to this theory, as deserts spread in Africa and southwest Asia, people, animals, and plants were forced into closer contact in smaller areas (oases or river valleys). The need for

thousand years, temperatures and sea levels gradually rose. Many Ice Age species, such as the woolly mammoth, saber-toothed tiger, and giant ground sloth, became extinct. The continents began to assume their present shapes as seas covered continental shelves and land bridges in various areas, including the one between Siberia and North America. The rising waters also cut off some former peninsulas such as Britain and Japan, turning them into islands. Major rivers such as the Nile and the Mississippi filled their valleys with silt and created expansive deltas. Rainfall across North Africa and southwest Asia was higher than it had been during the Ice Age and much higher than it is now. The area that is now the Sahara Desert was covered with grasslands and shallow lakes supporting herds of giraffes, hippopotami, and other animals. Forests and dense stands of wild cereal grasses gradually replaced the former dry steppe grasslands in Syria and the Levant.

Peoples around the Near East altered their lifestyles to take advantage of changing environments. The Natufian culture that emerged in Palestine and southern Syria around 12,000 BCE (see [Table 1.1](#)) developed a new subsistence pattern to exploit these environmental changes.

Table 1.1 Simplified Chronology of the Near East and Egypt in Prehistory

	DATE bcs*	LEVANT/SYRIA	ANATOLIA	MESOPOTAMIA		EGYPT	
				NORTH	SOUTH	NORTH	SOUTH
PALEOLITHIC	12,000	NATUFIAN Domestication of the dog					QADAN
NEOLITHIC <i>Pre-Pottery Neolithic A</i>	10,800–9,200	YOUNGER DRAS					
	10,200	JERICHO Cultivation of plants					
	9,000		Domestication of pigs? (Halani Çemni) GÖBEKLI TEPE				
			ÇAYÖNÜ/NEVALI ÇORI				
<i>Pre-Pottery Neolithic B</i>	8,500	AIN GHAZAL Domestication of plants					
<i>Pottery Neolithic/Late Neolithic</i>	8,000	Domestication of sheep, goats and cattle					
	6,900	Introduction of pottery					
	6,400	AMUQ B/ YARIMOLUKIAN**	ÇATALHÖYÜK	PROTO-HASSUNA			
		TRANSITIONAL		HASSUNA			
CHALCOLITHIC	6,000	HALAF				SAMARRA/ UBAID 0	
	5,800	HALAF	EARLY CHALCOLITHIC/ HALAF***	HALAF	UBAID 1		
			MIDDLE CHALCOLITHIC/ UBAID***				
	5,400	EARLY CHALCOLITHIC/ UBAID***		UBAID	UBAID 2		
	5,000				UBAID 3	MERIMDE/EL OMARI	BADARIAN
	4,500	LATE CHALCOLITHIC	LATE CHALCOLITHIC		UBAID 4		
EARLY BRONZE AGE	4,000						
	3,400	"URUK EXPANSION"	"URUK EXPANSION"	URUK	EARLY URUK LATE URUK	BITO-MAADI NAQADA II	NAQADA I
	3,000					PROTODYNASTIC/ DYNASTY 0	

Notes: *Dates are based on a combination of the calibrated C14 dates used in ASPRO (Atlas des sites du Proche Orient, Hours et al. 1994), Akkermans and Schwartz (2003), and Potts (2012). **Yamukian is the name given to the Late Neolithic culture of the Southern Levant. ***Archaeologists working in Anatolia prefer the sequence of Early-Late Chalcolithic rather than using cultural horizons derived from Southern Mesopotamia, e.g., "Halaf".

Some Natufians continued to live in caves, but others settled on riverbanks, lakeshores, and in areas that later would be deserts. Abundant wild food supplies allowed the Natufian people to become **sedentary** and gradually increase the size of their groups. While remaining hunters, fishers, and

gatherers, the Natufians lived in fairly large settlements ranging in size from around 5,400 to 21,500 square feet (500 to 2,000 square meters). The larger sites such as Munhatta in Israel and Tell Abu Hureyra in Syria (see [Map 1.1](#)) probably had a population of between 150 and 250 people who seem to have occupied the sites year-round. Natufian settlements contained rows, and later clusters, of circular or oval huts. The lower portions of the huts' walls were made of undressed stone, while the upper portion probably consisted of a framework of wood and animal skins or reeds. The floors were often partially recessed into the earth and sometimes contained mud-plastered storage pits.

Storage facilities are a new feature suggesting that the Natufians intensively gathered wild barley and **emmer** wheat (a variety of wheat produced naturally when wild **einkorn** wheat crossed with a type of wild grass) as well as acorns and other nuts to supplement their hunting of gazelles, deer, wild cattle, goats, and pigs. This idea is supported by finds of numerous stone-grinding mortars and pestles, as well as the earliest-known sickles (consisting of small flint blades set into wood or bone handles). Because gruel or porridge made from grain is not very appetizing, especially when meat dishes were still widely available, some scholars have argued that early peoples used grain primarily to make beer (Katz and Voigt 1986: 23–24). However, whether to make gruel, beer, or bread, the evidence suggests that some Natufian communities gathered large amounts of wild grains. This growing reliance on grains would eventually lead to **incipient cultivation** (that is, near their settlements, these groups planted wild grains from seeds they had collected, in some cases probably from places fairly distant from the settlements) although there is little evidence for this during the Natufian. At Tell Abu Hureyra in Syria (see [Map 1.1](#)), the villagers seem to have driven wild gazelles into stone enclosures near the site and then killed them. In time, the people may have begun to keep some of the animals alive within the pens for later use, a form of **incipient herding**. There is clear evidence that the Natufians had domesticated the dog before 10,000 BCE, but it seems to have remained the only fully domesticated animal for at least 2,000 years.

Natufian sites have also produced evidence of growing trade in marine shells, gemstones, obsidian, and other goods, which probably included salt. Robert Wenke has noted that

with the increased importance of wild cereals in the diet, salt probably became for the first time a near necessity: people who eat a lot of meat get many essential salts from this diet, but diets based on cereals can be deficient in salts.

(Wenke 1999: 293)

Salt became an increasingly important trade commodity over time.

There are indications that the luxury items obtained through trade were not

evenly distributed throughout the population, so differences in social rank and status probably existed. Such social stratification and some kind of leadership for the larger Natufian communities would naturally be suspected on the basis of ethnographic analogy, although marked rankings within Natufian sites are few. Differences in Natufian burials may indicate social differentiation, but this is controversial (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003: 28). Most of the dead were unaccompanied by grave goods, but a few were buried with luxury items such as beaded headdresses, necklaces, pendants, or belts made of shells, bone, and various kinds of stone.

The Natufians usually buried their dead under house floors and at cave entrances, but customs differed from place to place. At Nahal Oren on Mount Carmel (see [Map 1.1](#)), large limestone mortars were placed in the graves, their pierced bottoms at the level of the corpse while their uppermost portions protruded above the earth filling. These stones seem to have linked the living with the dead. Traces of burning on top of the graves suggest special rites, perhaps funeral meals. The heads of the dead at Ain Mallaha (see [Map 1.1](#)) were wedged between two stones and their extremities covered with large stones as if intended to keep them in the graves. At some late sites, the heads had been removed from adult bodies before burial. Some scholars think these various burial practices indicate that the Natufian people had a cult of ancestor worship. At the least, they show that the Natufians had developed some concepts about the meaning and nature of death.

What seems to be nonutilitarian art is another feature of Natufian settlements. These people decorated bone and stone objects with incised geometric patterns. They also created three-dimensional carved figurines of animals and humans, especially women. It is usually assumed that the statuettes have religious significance—for example, the female figures may have been representations of the “Mother Goddess.” It also has been suggested that the carved designs may have reflected a growing sense of group identity (symbols designating nascent clans or tribes), while the beaded necklaces and ornaments indicated differences in rank or status within the group.

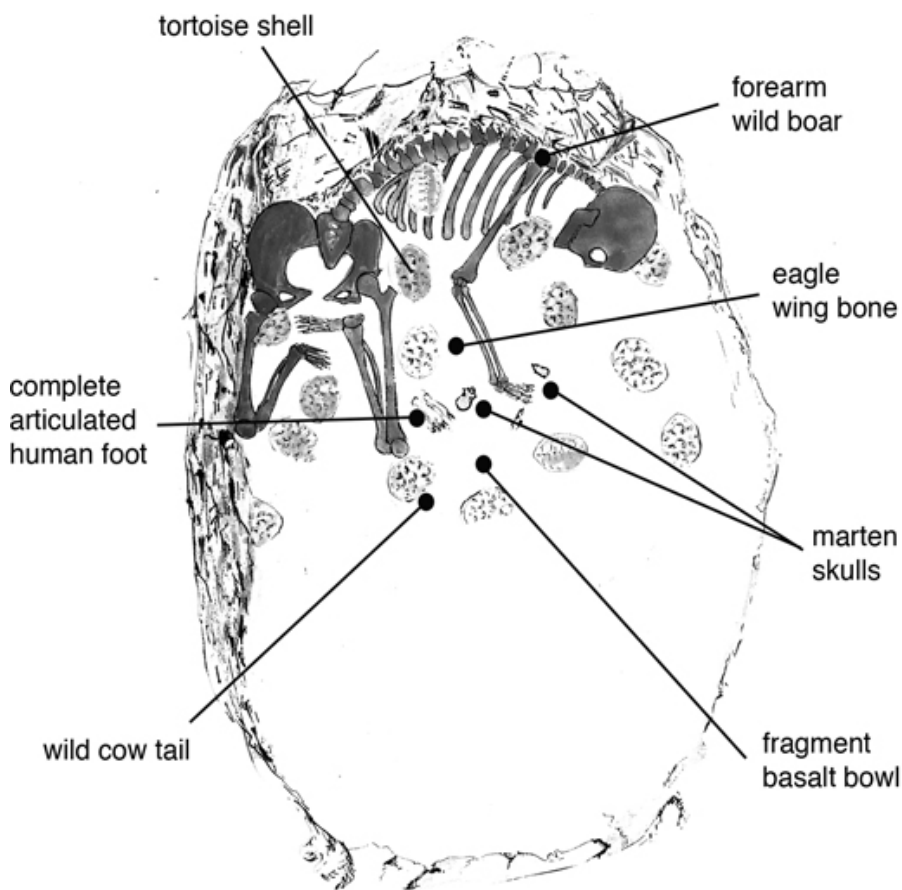


Figure 1.1 Shaman Burial at Hilazon Tachtit, c. 10,000 BCE

Grosman, Leore, Natalie Munro, and Anna Belfer-Cohen. "A 12,000-year-old Shaman burial from the Southern Levant (Israel)." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 105, no. 46 (2008). P. 17667, fig. 4. (P. Grosman, Jerusalem, Israel).

A newly discovered grave in northern Israel gives us another view of Natufian society and ideology. At Hilazon Tachtit, a small cave site near the Sea of Galilee, a Natufian community buried an elderly (aged forty-five) and disabled woman with a bewildering array of tortoise shells and other special animal parts such as an eagle wing, cow and leopard bones, and wild martens (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Comparisons with other pre-agricultural societies have led the excavators to interpret this as the burial of a shaman, one of the earliest of its kind (Grosman et al. 2008). The shaman, a keeper of specialized knowledge and in close contact with the spirit world, is a feature of many hunter-gatherer and small-scale agricultural societies. The rich spiritual world of the Natufian communities are the manifestations of the ideological shifts that must have accompanied the socioeconomic transformations of the time.

While Natufian settlements in Palestine declined around 10,000 BCE, several features of Natufian life laid the groundwork for the succeeding Neolithic Period (or “New Stone Age”). Year-round Natufian settlements mark the beginning of sedentary life. The domestication of the dog is the first instance of animal domestication, and incipient cultivation was a stepping-stone to full-scale agriculture. Early Natufian rituals may also have laid the groundwork for later Neolithic religious practices. The Natufians set in motion a process of domestication that would take another 2,000 years to be fully realized, but would fundamentally change human societies. Interestingly enough, the next stage of development would by and large take place not in the Levantine core of Natufian settlement, but in the areas to the north and east.

Early Agricultural Communities in Southwest Asia: “The Neolithic Revolution” (c. 10,200–6000 BCE)

At the end of the Natufian Period, regional variations of the culture developed in different parts of Palestine and southern Syria. At about the same time, related village cultures emerged in northern Syria, Asia Minor, and in the hills north and east of Mesopotamia. The appearance of these village cultures marks the beginning of the Neolithic Period, a stage in human development characterized by the shift from a subsistence economy of hunting and gathering to one of agriculture and stock raising.

The climate in southwest Asia began to turn cooler and drier (especially in the summers) around 10,800 BCE, though not permanently, as once believed. This climatic change, known as the Younger Dryas, lasted a little over a millennium. It probably helped trigger the “Agricultural Revolution,” but not exactly in the way Childe had hypothesized. As we have seen, groups of Natufians were already living in permanent or semipermanent settlements and were probably practicing incipient cultivation of wild grains. Also, their population had been slowly growing. The increasing seasonal aridity after approximately 9500 BCE and the more populous communities made it much more difficult for semi-sedentary or sedentary groups to continue to support themselves by intensive hunting and gathering. Many Natufian settlements were abandoned, and the descendants of their inhabitants seem to have become mobile hunters and gatherers once more. Others probably adapted by storing more food for use in the summer, but in order to stay near their stored supplies they likely became even more sedentary. Some communities began to experiment with various wild grains, first selecting those that were best suited to the local environment, and then eventually mixing different varieties to

produce hybrids that could grow in diverse environments. Thus, at the beginning of the Neolithic Period, the descendants of the Natufian people domesticated plants and became the first genuine agriculturalists (Bar-Yosef 1998; Wenke 1999; Simmons 2007, 2012). Knowledge of agriculture gradually spread through western Asia and eventually to Egypt. However, though the Levant was probably the earliest site of agricultural development, it was not the only one. At slightly later times, agriculture developed independently in East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, New Guinea in the Pacific, and Mesoamerica in the New World. As anthropologist Robert Wenke points out, “The fact that domestication appeared independently in many different environments at many different times and involved scores of plant and animal species, however, suggests that climatic changes alone do not entirely explain the origins of agriculture” (Wenke 1999: 293).



Figure 1.2 The Pre-Pottery Neolithic A Tower at Jericho, c. 7500 BCE

The square hole in the center of the tower's top is the entrance to the internal stairway.
University College of London Institute of Archaeology Library. © Peter Dorrell, UCL.

In the Levant, the Natufian-derived cultures of the period from c. 10,200 to 8800 BCE are generally labeled “Pre-Pottery Neolithic A” (PPNA). The PPNA saw the rise of true villages and the first clear evidence for the cultivation of plants. While most PPNA communities continued to have fewer than 200 inhabitants, a few were much larger. Tell Mureybit on the Euphrates in Syria, and Jericho near a spring in the Jordan valley (see [Map 1.1](#)), probably had hundreds of occupants (in the case of Jericho, possibly as many as a thousand). Jericho is clearly the most important PPNA site. Its small Natufian settlement

developed into a large PPNA village of circular mud-brick huts with stone foundations spread over an area of some eight to ten acres. Jericho's inhabitants protected their settlement with a twenty-eight-foot-wide ditch and a stone wall five to ten feet thick. In the 1950s, archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon dug only small portions of the mound down to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A strata. Nevertheless, in her three major trenches on the north, south, and west sides of the mound, she found segments of wall, some surviving to a height of about 2.5 meters (more than 8 feet). Presumably, these defenses surrounded the entire site. Attached to the inside of the wall on Jericho's western side was a massive circular stone tower about thirty-three feet in diameter and twenty-eight feet high (see [Figure 1.2](#)). The tower was solid except for a steep, internal, twenty-two-step staircase leading to the top. Kenyon believed that the ditch, wall, and tower were designed for defense against human enemies. The walls also could have been meant to keep out wild animals, though they seem to be much larger than necessary for that purpose. Others have suggested that the walls may have been created to protect the settlement against mudslides and seasonal flooding (Bar-Yosef 1986: 157–162). The purpose of the tower, though, is puzzling. Since it was on the inside of the wall, it would not have been very useful in warfare except as a lookout post. Thus, some think the tower may have had a religious or social function rather than a military one (Ronen and Adler 2001; Naveh 2003; Liran and Barkai 2011).

Whatever their intended use (and they might have served more than one purpose), these monuments took much manpower and time to build. They indicate that PPNA Jericho must have had a strong, organized system of leadership. Study of faunal remains from Jericho's PPNA layers reveals that wild animals were still being hunted, and there is little evidence of animal domestication. However, archaeologists have uncovered traces of the cultivation of plants such as barley and wheat as well as figs and lentils, although they do not yet show the morphological signs of domestication. These crops, produced in abundance in the oasis around Jericho's spring, must have represented the settlement's primary wealth, though trade of salt, bitumen, and other products from the Dead Sea probably contributed as well.

The succeeding period (c. 8800–6900 BCE) in the Levant is called Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB). Agriculture greatly progressed during this era, and sites were located in a variety of regions, including areas now very arid, such as the **Negev** in Palestine, the Transjordanian Plateau, and southern Sinai. This occupation pattern and other evidence indicate that the dry weather of the Younger Dryas had ended. In fact, rainfall amounts in PPNB were not only greater than during PPNA, but probably also greater than at present.

In the early 1980s, a large PPNB agricultural village, first occupied around 8200 BCE, was excavated at Ain Ghazal near Amman, Jordan (see [Map 1.1](#)). By

the mid-eighth millennium BCE, Ain Ghazal grew to one of the largest sites in the region. Even if the entire site was not occupied at the same time, Ain Ghazal probably had one of the largest populations in the Near East (approximately 2,500–3,000 people). Only the estimates for the site of Abu Hureyra in Syria are comparable. Its stone buildings were generally rectangular rather than circular, had plastered floors, and seem to have varied in size (possibly indicating disparities in wealth). Although its inhabitants had herds of goats and grew domesticated wheat, barley, peas, lentils, and chickpeas, half of their diet still consisted of wild game and plants (mostly pistachios, almonds, and figs).

The best-known find from Ain Ghazal is a series of human statues made of lime plaster modeled over reed and grass cores (see [Figure 1.3](#)). Details of the faces and garments were painted on the plaster, and eyes were often made of inlaid shells with painted dots in the center. These sculptures are relatively large, some about 3 feet high. Similar PPNB plaster statues are known from Jericho and a cave in Nahal Hemar in the Judean Desert (see [Map 1.1](#)). However, the examples from Ain Ghazal are more numerous and better preserved than the others. Such statues seem to have been religious in nature and, according to excavator Gary Rollefson, they probably reflect “a sophisticated system of public ritual and ceremony” (Rollefson 1992: 132). Smaller clay figurines, usually of animals and women, may also have been used in magic rituals (Rollefson 1983). On the other hand, these figurines possibly were just toys or dolls.

Another indicator of eighth-millennium religious beliefs, possibly ancestor worship, are caches of human skulls, often plastered and decorated. The practice of removing heads from bodies and burying them separately had existed in the PPNA era. However, at Ain Ghazal,



Figure 1.3 Plaster Statues from Ain Ghazal, Jordan, c. 6500 BCE

University College of London Institute of Archaeology Library. © Peter Dorrell and Stuart Laidlaw, UCL.

Beisamoun, Jericho, Tell Ramad, and Tell Aswad (see [Map 1.1](#)), skulls now were made more lifelike by covering them with plaster modeled into human features. Embedded seashells often were used for eyes. One skull found in the

Nahal Hemar cave had bitumen on top, possibly representing hair. In the early Neolithic the skulls were on display on house floors and domestic settings, while in the PPNB they were buried in cultic deposits. The close relationship between the living and dead is also evident in the existence of charnel houses. One building at Abu Hureyra served this purpose. A narrow room located at the end of one mudbrick house contained the remains of at least twenty-four bodies, often headless, and a collection of skulls in groups deposited on the floor. In a second room, a pit contained the skeletons of twenty-five to thirty children, some also headless. Similar practices can be found at other sites in Syria and Turkey (e.g., the Skull Building at Çayönü—see later in this section).

Evidence for early sedentary communities and the experimentation with domesticating plants and animals also comes from the **Zagros Mountain region** to the east of Mesopotamia and in southeastern **Anatolia** (modern Turkey). Early Neolithic sites in the Zagros, such as Jarmo, Ganj Dareh, and Zawi Chemi were once thought to show the earliest examples of sheep and plant domestication as wild species occur in the foothills. It is now clear, however, that these early sites did not adopt herd management strategies until the early eighth and seventh millennia BCE, and plant domestication here followed the Levant by nearly two centuries (Zeder 2008).

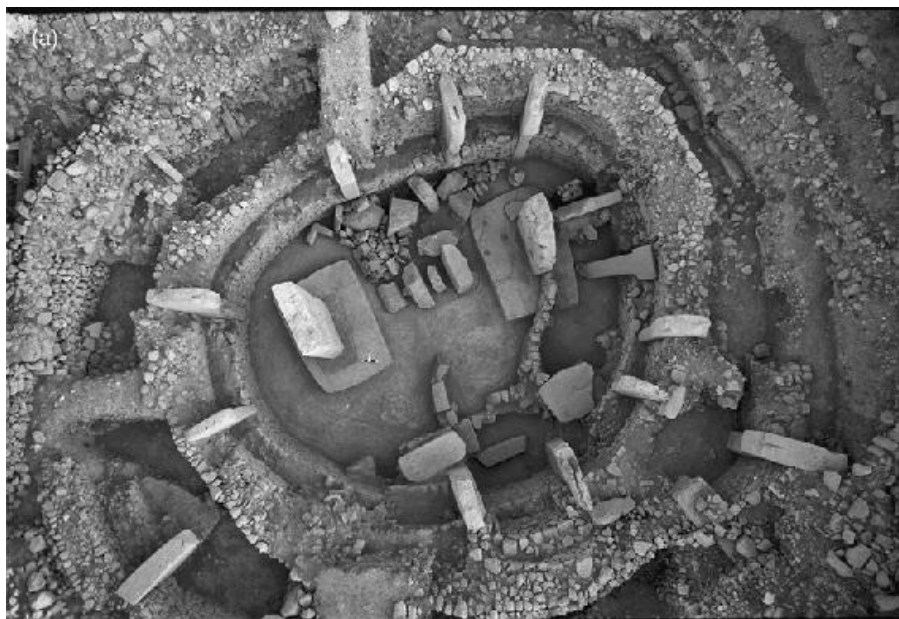


Figure 1.4a Göbekli Tepe, Enclosure C Seen from the Air

S. Steadman and G. McMahon (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Anatolia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Figure 42.3, p. 923 (photo from the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

Recent work in Anatolia has unearthed a unique site that has upended our understanding of the processes of sedentarization and social complexity. Beginning in the mid-1990s archaeologist Klaus Schmidt uncovered monumental structures in southeastern Turkey dating to approximately 9500 BCE, much earlier than the “public buildings” of the Levant or Syria. Even more surprisingly, these large ritual structures developed before sedentary agricultural villages in this part of Anatolia. The site, known as Göbekli Tepe (“potbelly hill”), consists of numerous large circular structures with central supports of tall T-shaped pillars carved out of single blocks of stone (see [Figure 1.4](#)). Many of these pillars have carved reliefs of animals such as snakes, ducks, boars, foxes, vultures, spiders, and scorpions; some have arms and hands and clearly represent humans. All of the structures had been backfilled and the site was finally abandoned around 8000 BCE.



Figure 1.4b Göbekli Tepe, Pillar 43 from Enclosure D

© VINCENT J. MUSI/National Geographic Creative.

Göbekli Tepe was not a settlement, but a regional cult center built by mobile hunter-gatherers. The excavator believes that it may have served as a communal burial center. The large monumental buildings with massive stone pillars (weighing several tons) would have required the mobilization of large numbers of people. The excavators argue that the need for steady and cheap food to maintain the workforce needed for these religious structures or for large ritual feasts that took place there was one of the catalysts for new subsistence strategies that eventually led to the domestication of plants and

animals (Schmidt 2011: 930).

Other small village sites in southeastern Anatolia in the ninth and eighth millennia BCE, roughly contemporary with the PPNA-B sites of the Levant, also demonstrate a different trajectory towards domestication from the Levant. In the Euphrates uplands of southeastern Turkey, early PPNA villages that began as year-round hunting and gathering settlements slowly transitioned towards domesticated animals, first pigs at Hallan Çemi, c. 9000 BCE and then sheep and goats at Çayönü Tepesi, c. 8000 BCE. Like Göbekli Tepe, the PPNA-B sites in the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, such as Nevalı Çori, Jerf el Ahmar, and Çayönü Tepesi, were rich in art and religious symbolism and had distinct ritual buildings often dedicated to mortuary practices.

Çayönü Tepesi was a small settlement of nearly 100–200 inhabitants that was occupied from c. 9500 to 6500 BCE (see [Map 1.1](#)). Çayönü's inhabitants were some of the earliest peoples to produce wheat and raise sheep and goats. They also created some implements and jewelry by cold-hammering native nuggets of copper. Çayönü is best known for an unusual central building called the Skull Building, which housed several complete or partial human skeletons and more than ninety human skulls aligned along its sides. A large stone slab within the building still has traces of human and animal blood and is presumably where bodies were cut up before being deposited on the sides of the building. Archaeologists have excavated other early agricultural villages in Asia Minor at Hacilar, Suberde, and in the southern plain near Konya, a dense village called Aşıklı Höyük that prefigures the later and more famous site of Catalhöyük (see [Map 1.1](#)).

Catalhöyük, in the foothills of the Taurus Mountains, is the best-known Neolithic site in Asia Minor (see [Map 1.1](#)). It was continuously occupied between about 7400 and 5600 BCE. At its zenith (c. 6500 BCE), it covered more than thirty acres and had between 3,500 and 8,000 inhabitants. It was one of the largest sites of its time, many times larger than most Neolithic villages. The population seems to have utilized at least some irrigation to grow domesticated varieties of wheat, barley, peas, bitter vetch, and lentils. They also had herds of domesticated sheep and goats that probably provided milk, yogurt, butter, and cheese to the diet in addition to meat. Hunting and gathering also continued, supplying extra meat and skins (especially from wild cattle), wild walnuts, berries, pears, crabapples, grapes, figs, and pomegranates, all native to the area.

Catalhöyük's economy flourished because of craft industry and trade in addition to agriculture and sheep and goat herding. Craftsmen produced woven cloth and rugs, clay and stone statuettes, flint and obsidian tools, carved objects of bone or wood, and lead (and in the later levels, copper) pendants and

beads. Production occurred in individual houses throughout the site rather than being concentrated in only a few structures. So, it is likely that the artisans were still primarily farmers who worked only part-time at their other crafts. The people of Çatalhöyük also used handmade pottery vessels, but these are simple enough that they probably did not require specialized craftsmen for their manufacture. Furthermore, just as Jericho probably prospered in part because of access to trade commodities from the Dead Sea, much of Çatalhöyük's wealth probably derived from nearby deposits of obsidian. Neolithic people highly prized this lustrous dark volcanic glass that they could use to make beautiful tools and ornaments. Obsidian formed one of the staples of early trade in the Near East, and Çatalhöyük seems to have been a center for its distribution.

Çatalhöyük was not walled like Jericho. Instead, its mud-brick houses were joined to one another by common walls and had no entrances on the ground floor. The outer house walls presented an unbroken barrier to humans or wild animals that sought entrance (see [Figure 1.5](#)). Residents must have entered the town by means of ladders that could quickly be pulled up if enemies threatened. Even inside the settlement, ladders were used to enter houses from the courtyards around which many of them were grouped or to reach a house's upper stories. There were no streets—residents moved across the rooftops, which probably were also used for a variety of social and economic activities.

The inhabitants buried their dead in family graves beneath the floors or plaster platforms within their houses. Mellaart, the original excavator of Çatalhöyük, thought that prior to burial bodies had been placed on platforms outside the settlement until the flesh was stripped away by birds and insects (Mellaart 1967). Then the bones were wrapped in cloth, woven mats, or baskets and deposited in the graves. His opinion was based on his finds of a few jumbled skeletons beneath platforms and on paintings showing headless corpses being attacked by vultures. However, recent excavations at the site found many intact skeletons that did not support Mellaart's view. Small bones were found with most burials and the remains exhibited much less disruption than they should have if their flesh had been stripped away by vultures and other scavengers. In several instances, though, graves had been reopened later and the skulls removed for use in various ceremonies (Balter 2004: 287–288; Hodder 2006: 55, 123–125, 146–149). Whatever jumbling of bones that occurred was probably due to this custom or to the later burial of other bodies in the same area. In some burials, red ochre had been washed over the bones, and sometimes skulls that had been retrieved from earlier burials had been placed on platforms or against the walls (see [Figure 1.6a](#)). In 2004 excavators found a plastered skull held in the arms of an adult female who had been buried under a platform. Eleven other plastered skulls have been uncovered at Köşk Höyük,

another Anatolian Neolithic site. Thus, funerary rituals featuring skulls with modeled facial features were practiced in Asia Minor as in Israel, Jordan, and Syria (Bonogofsky 2004). Most burials contained no burial goods, but some included jewelry, weapons, and other personal items. Evidence from the burials indicates that the average life span of the residents of Çatalhöyük was short—34.3 years for men and 29.8 years for women. Few people lived more than forty years, though a small number reached the age of sixty or more. Only slightly more than half of the average 4.2 children born per family managed to survive infancy.



Figure 1.5 A Reconstruction of the Town of Çatalhöyük during a Spring Flood

Ian Hodder, *The Leopard's Tale* (Thames and Hudson, 2006), Figure 3, p. 67.

Mellaart believed that at least forty of the 139 rooms he uncovered might have been used as cult centers or shrines. Such a concentration of cult centers suggested to Mellaart that this portion of the site had been the sacred quarter (Mellaart 1967). However, Ian Hodder, the archaeologist who resumed excavations at Çatalhöyük in the 1990s, interprets all of the

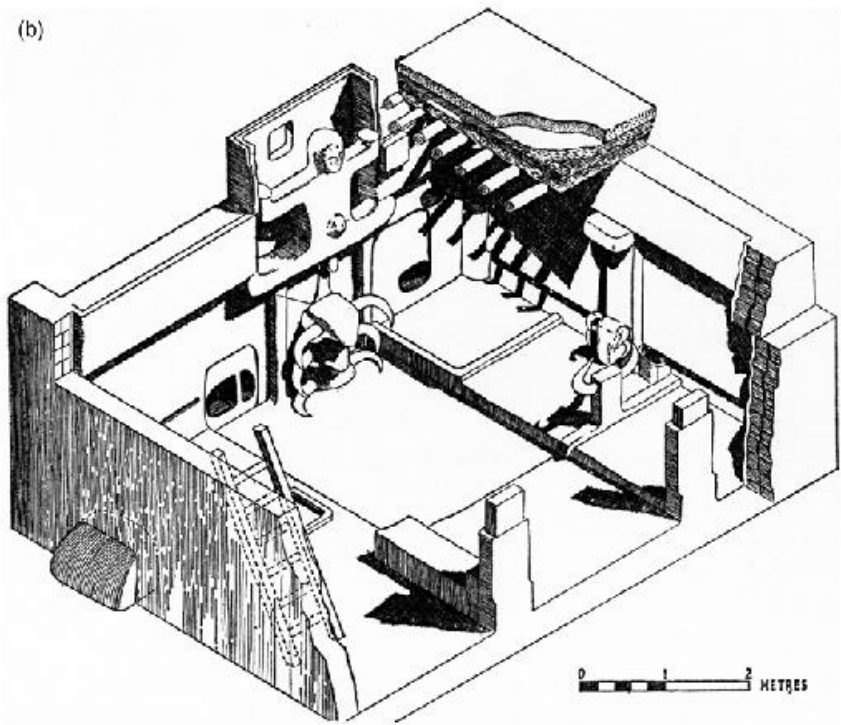
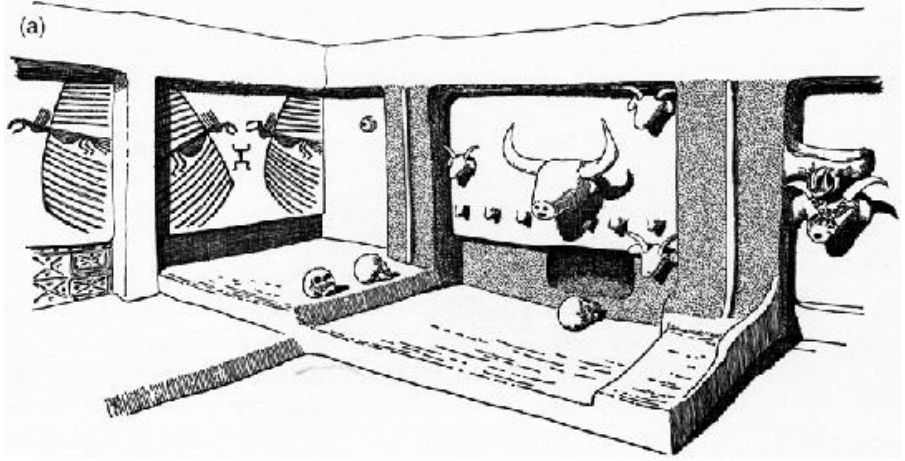


Figure 1.6 Reconstructions of Two Houses' Cultic Areas ("Shrines") at Çatalhöyük

These reconstructions show the importance of bulls, rams, birth, and death.

James Mellaart, *Çatalhöyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).

structures at the site as "houses with varying degrees of symbolic and ritual elaboration" (Hodder 2006: 110). The houses Mellaart called "shrines" usually contained modeled plaster bullheads and bulls' horns inset into plaster benches

or into the sculptured heads (see [Figure 1.6](#)). Some structures were also decorated with modeled plaster rams' heads, plaster-covered boars' jaws, antlers and teeth of wild animals, elaborate wall paintings, and plaster bas-reliefs. One interesting painting of a village near an erupting volcano may have been a representation of Çatalhöyük itself. The paintings and reliefs often featured wild animals being hunted or taunted, representations of leopards or other large cats, vultures attacking headless human bodies (see [Figure 1.6a](#)), or females (goddesses?) giving birth to rams or bulls (see [Figure 1.6b](#)). Though some houses (the so-called shrines) were more elaborately decorated than others, all showed evidence of domestic activities, food storage, and craft production in addition to probable religious or cultic use. Thus, the house seems to have been the central unit for all forms of social activity at Çatalhöyük, and the excavators noted little evidence of differentiation of labor or social status.

After about 6900 BCE, pottery use spread across the Near East, becoming universal at village sites by about 6000 BCE. Because pottery is cheap and easy to make compared to stone or wooden vessels, it became the most common artifact found at ancient sites. It is easily broken, and the broken pieces (called **sherds**, potsherds, or shards) cannot be reused, so they are discarded. Though whole pottery vessels are fragile, broken sherds, once buried in debris, last for thousands of years. Moreover, the shape and decoration of pottery vessels were modified more frequently than those of other artifacts and, due to their relatively low cost, fragility, and changes in style, pottery vessels were not generally passed down generation after generation as heirlooms. Thus, more than any other artifact, archaeologists use pottery shapes, decoration, and technique of manufacture to identify and date archaeological assemblages from ancient cultures.

The widespread use of pottery after c. 6900 BCE shows the increasingly sedentary nature of Near Eastern societies in the latter part of the Neolithic Period, for pottery is too fragile and too heavy to be of much use to nomadic groups. Its rapid spread also suggests the growing need for watertight containers (for storing, carrying, cooking, and consuming food or drink) in sedentary agricultural communities. By the end of the seventh millennium BCE, most of the plants and animals that would later be utilized throughout the Near East had been domesticated. Also, agriculture and pottery use had expanded westward through Greece to much of Europe and eastward to Pakistan and Central Asia. Around 6000 BCE, complex and distinctive pottery styles made on a slow wheel (a wooden slab on a peg that could be turned by hand) began to appear. The spread of these styles over wide areas suggests that some societies were beginning to develop political and economic structures more complex than those of individual villages.

The Development of Complex Societies in Southwest Asia (c. 6500–4000 BCE)

Major advances now began to occur in Mesopotamia as people introduced domesticated plants and animals into this area and developed the technologies and organization to manage extensive irrigation systems. A series of chronologically overlapping cultures, primarily distinguished by their characteristic pottery styles, gradually spread over Mesopotamia. These cultures, named after the sites where they were first noted, are the Proto-Hassuna, Hassuna, Samarra, and Halaf in the north, and the Ubaid in the south (see [Map 1.1](#) and [Table 1.1](#)). They are notable as the precursors to the flowering of Mesopotamian civilization that was to follow in the Uruk Period (c. 4000 BCE).

A people producing a coarse pottery known as Proto-Hassuna are the first known settlers of Mesopotamia c. 6400 BCE. The succeeding Hassuna culture (c. 6400–5800 BCE) is characterized by small villages on the north Mesopotamian plain along the Tigris River averaging between 100 and 200 inhabitants. Houses consisted of several rooms grouped around a central courtyard. A few vessels (possibly containing food and water) were buried with the dead, suggesting belief in some kind of existence after death. There were not very many luxury goods, few indications of significant differences in wealth or status, and no evidence of temples or administrative centers. However, the distribution of Hassuna painted ware across northern Mesopotamia connects these independent agricultural villages to one another, probably tied together through tribal affiliations structured on notions of kinship (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995: 98).

Contemporary or nearly contemporary with the Hassuna Period, a new pottery style developed just to the south of Hassuna sites, and is named after the site of Samarra. This style defines an area of central Mesopotamia north of Baghdad. Some think it originated in Iran, for the designs on its pottery (painted geometrical designs and stylized animals) are similar to some found at several Iranian sites. However, the latest analysis demonstrates that Samarran pottery developed directly from Proto-Hassuna pottery in northern Mesopotamia. Comparisons with Iran suggest that influence went west to east, rather than the other way around. Samarran sites, especially Tell es-Sawwan (a site on the Tigris about sixty miles north of Baghdad), provide evidence for trade and a high level of craftsmanship in making pottery and other artifacts. Possibly some specialization existed in several of the crafts. A few graves contained objects made of alabaster, turquoise, carnelian, greenstone, and copper, probably indicating some differentiation in status and wealth and

demonstrating the wide regional interactions of the period.

In addition to food crops, the Samarran people grew flax (linseed) for making linen and oil. This culture seems to have been the first to depend on irrigation to grow its crops, for the area it occupied probably could not have supported **dry farming** (agriculture based on rainfall alone). The practice of irrigation is also indicated by the large size of the flax seeds found at Samarran sites and by the fact that at Choga Mami (east of Baghdad, on the border with Iran, see [Map 1.1](#)) archaeologists found traces of irrigation canals that probably belong to this period. The Samarrans used large sun-dried molded mud-bricks to build buttressed rectangular houses and, at Tell es-Sawwan at least, a fortification wall. They also constructed buttressed T-shaped storage buildings similar in appearance to later Sumerian T-shaped temples. These storage buildings seem to have been communal, suggesting that seed, grain, and probably fields were owned by the entire community. The Halaf culture (c. 5900/5800 to 5400 BCE) succeeded that of Hassuna in the north and eventually replaced the Samarra assemblage in north-central Mesopotamia. It spread over a much wider area than its predecessors, occupying a wide band from the Mediterranean coast and southeastern Turkey through northern Syria and northern Iraq. Its settlements, a few of which perhaps should be called small towns rather than villages, were not normally built on top of previous ones, and Halaf buildings were usually circular instead of rectangular. In the past, scholars debated the origins for the sophisticated polychrome pottery and new style of building of the Halaf culture. Recent excavations in eastern Syria, however, have made it clear that the Halaf was a locally derived style following the Samarra (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003: 116).

The most characteristic remains of the Halaf culture are its ceramic wares that were skillfully decorated with intricate geometric designs in glossy red, black, and white paint. The consistent excellence of Halaf pottery and analysis of its clay and designs indicate that specialists in only a few production centers produced it. It was distributed not only over the large area of the Halaf culture itself, but because of its quality and beauty it was also traded over even greater distances. Some scholars see the existence of regional centers for pottery manufacture as evidence for a tribal organization of Halaf society under the leadership of chieftains. However, at present there is not enough evidence for scholars to be certain about the Halaf culture's social organization. Although large regional centers such as the site of Domuztepe in southeastern Turkey existed, there is little evidence for social hierarchies and public institutions in this period. Only at Arpachiyeh, a site in northern Iraq, is there evidence for a communal building of some sort, perhaps to be associated with a chief.

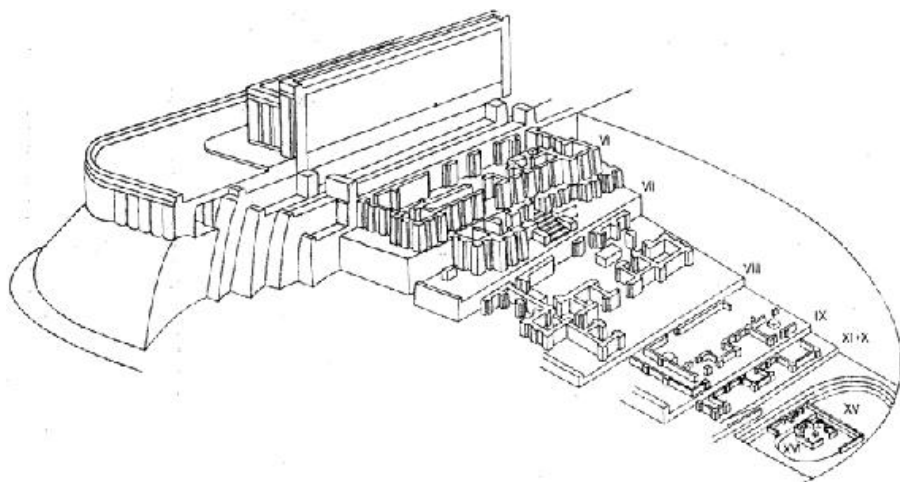
Contemporary with the northern Halaf, an important new culture was developing in southern Mesopotamia, called the Ubaid (c. 6000–4000 BCE). The

earliest settlement discovered so far in the lower Tigris and Euphrates valleys was at Tell Awayli (or Tell Oueili as it is spelled by its French excavators) near later Larsa (see [Map 1.1](#)). Finds from the lowest levels of this site have affinities with both the earlier Samarra culture to the north and the later Ubaid culture of the south. This fact suggests that the Ubaid culture was not brought to Mesopotamia from Iran or some other foreign area as once thought, but rather developed in southern Mesopotamia from Samarran antecedents. Thus, the excavators of Awayli have dubbed its earliest assemblages “Ubaid 0” because the designation “Ubaid 1” had already been used.¹ The southern portion of Mesopotamia was not an ideal environment for agricultural settlements. Rainfall was sporadic and insufficient for agriculture. There were no metal ores or precious stones for luxury goods or trade and no hardwood trees or stone for construction materials. The summers were almost unbearably hot, while the winters were very cold. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers have unpredictable spring floods due to melting snow in the mountains of eastern Anatolia where these waterways originate. These floods not only could destroy settlements near them, but they came when crops were ripening, not during the planting season.

The early Ubaid people first settled along the river banks, especially those of the slower-flowing Euphrates, building houses of reeds and mud-brick and utilizing the irrigation from the rivers to grow their crops. In fact, southern Mesopotamia at this time was wetter than at present and many of the Ubaid settlements appear to have been islands amid marshes or wetlands. As their irrigation techniques improved, they were able to control the rivers a bit more. Their canals watered areas farther from the river channels, making more land suitable for occupation. The gradual growth in the size and number of Ubaid settlements shows that population was increasing. Tell Awayli (Ubaid 0) was quite small, but during the Ubaid 1 phase, Al-Ubaid, the type-site for the culture, probably housed at least 750 people (see [Map 1.1](#)). At the same time, Eridu, with a probable population of 2,000 to 4,000, likely was already a town with an important temple center (see [Map 1.1](#)). By the later stages of the Ubaid Period, many towns dotted the countryside, with some beginning to serve as central places akin to cities (McCormick Adams 1966; McCormick Adams and Nissen 1972). This population growth raises the common “chicken or egg” cause-and-effect question that cannot be answered. Did the Ubaid Period’s population growth result from more land being made available for agriculture by improved irrigation technology? Or, did having extra mouths to feed stimulate the improvement of irrigation techniques so that more land could be occupied?

In the earliest levels of Eridu (Ubaid 1), archaeologists uncovered a building with an altar-like platform within a deep recess. In the center of the room, they

found a similar structure with traces of burning on it, suggesting that it was an offering table (an altar for burnt offerings). The excavators' interpretation that this structure was a temple is borne out by the fact that not only does it have key features of later Mesopotamian temples, but also that ten later prehistoric temple-like structures were built directly above this one (see [Figure 1.7](#)). These buildings have the same form as those built on the same spot in historical times that written accounts definitely indicate were temples. Thus, the place where these temples stood seems to have been considered sacred for more than a thousand years.



[Figure 1.7](#) Temple Sequence at Eridu from the Ubaid Period through the Uruk Period

J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 25, fig. 2.2.

By the end of the sixth millennium BCE Ubaid culture had expanded into northern Mesopotamia, reaching as far as northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia. Ubaid 3 painted pottery replaced the Halaf style, and Ubaid-style temples, now much larger and standing upon raised platforms about three feet high, began to be built in the north as well as the south. At the site of Tepe Gawra level XIII (Ubaid 3 Period), archaeologists noted a complex of three Ubaid-style temples, but burials and painted mother-goddess figurines were of local types which were quite different from those of southern Mesopotamia. Ubaid cultural elements (largely pottery styles) also spread eastward into Khuzistan, an area of southwestern Iran also known as Susiana after its largest settlement, Susa (see [Map 1.1](#)), and southward into areas of Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar. Some Ubaid pottery reached as far as the United Arab Emirates and Oman. It is probable, though, that this Ubaid expansion into distant areas consisted of cultural influence, not population movements or conquest. In each area, local elements were mixed with the Ubaid influences from southern

Mesopotamia. Khuzistan (or Susiana), for example, already had irrigation-based agriculture, was densely populated, and had several large settlements besides Susa before coming under Ubaid influence during the last half of the fifth millennium BCE. Though it copied some Ubaid features, such as pottery forms and decoration, Khuzistan maintained its own cultural identity. Likewise, analysis of the clays of Ubaid pottery found at sites along the Persian Gulf shows that these wares were most likely made in the area around the southern Mesopotamian towns of Ur and Eridu. Thus, these vessels were imports and evidence of trade, rather than indicators that Ubaid people had colonized areas along the Persian Gulf.

By the latter part of the Ubaid Period, settlements in southern Mesopotamia and Khuzistan ranged from small villages to towns and a few small cities (e.g., Susa, Eridu, Uruk, and Ur). In Khuzistan and southern Mesopotamia, the sites were probably already beginning to be organized into networks in which small- and medium-sized sites were linked economically and politically with a larger 2,000- to 5,000-person community nearby. Monumental buildings within sites, such as the administrative building at Tell Abada (Building A), the platform at Susa, or the temples at Eridu and Uruk, also suggest growing social differentiation and economic or political complexity (Stein 1994). On the other hand, there is little evidence for status differentiation in personal wealth in the Ubaid Period. Therefore it is unclear how Ubaid society was organized and administered (Stein 1994). The increasingly complex societies of the Ubaid era in southern Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran formed the foundation for the Urban Revolution that would follow.

Early Cultures of the Nile Valley (c. 13,000–3500 BCE)

The Late Paleolithic and Neolithic hunter-gatherers in and near the Nile valley also made significant cultural progress. The Qadan culture (c. 13,000–10,000 BCE) that arose between the second cataract and southern Egypt has produced some of the earliest evidence for incipient cultivation, organized burials (three cemeteries), and perhaps the earliest evidence for organized warfare (many of the skeletons had stone points embedded in their bones or exhibited severe cut marks). By at least 8000 BCE, the people living in the Western Desert bordering southern Egypt seem to have been practicing incipient herding of cattle and they probably began domesticating them by c. 7000 BCE, only slightly later than in Asia Minor. It also appears that the people of Egypt's Western Desert

began using pottery before 8500 BCE, even earlier than the peoples of the Zagros area east of Mesopotamia.

At this prehistoric period the Eastern and Western Deserts known from later times in Egypt did not yet exist. These areas had enough rainfall to be grasslands or savannas and did not become deserts until about 4000–3600 BCE. The cattle herders who utilized these grassy expanses for grazing their cattle and hunting ostrich, gazelles, and other animals have left behind many petroglyphs and stone monuments. At a site called Nabta Playa in the Western Desert near the border with Sudan, archaeologists have found a stone circle with four larger stones in a line pointing north and south and another line of stones pointing 62 degrees east of south, the position of the sunrise at the summer solstice (June 21). They also found thirty mounds nearby, each topped with huge stones (some of which weighed as much as one and a half tons) (Wilkinson 2003: 164–167; 2013: 8–9). These burial mounds contained the remains of animals probably sacrificed in ceremonies of thanksgiving for the arrival of the summer rains. However, instead of an animal burial, one mound contained a large sandstone monolith carved to resemble a cow. Toby Wilkinson argues that these monuments may provide the origins of Egyptian monumental architecture and stone carving. He also notes that petroglyphs from the Eastern Desert depict hunting scenes, gods riding on boats, and double-plumed headdresses, themes that remained part of Egypt's symbolic art throughout later pharaonic history (Wilkinson 2013: 10).

By c. 6200 to 5900 BCE, Egyptian groups were creating villages containing as many as fourteen family units each. However, archaeologists have recovered few plant remains from these sites, so it is not certain that their occupants were agriculturalists. Around 6000 BCE, Egyptians definitely were gathering wild sorghum for food, but true farming does not seem to have become common in the Nile valley until long after its appearance in the rest of the Near East. The inhabitants dwelling near the Nile continued to live largely by fishing supplemented with hunting and gathering into the fifth millennium BCE.

The earliest known town in Egypt developed c. 5000 BCE at a site called Merimde on the western edge of the Delta, about fifteen miles northwest of Cairo (see [Map 1.1](#)). This part of the Nile valley, the Delta area north of Cairo, was known in antiquity as Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt was the long thin portion of the Nile valley from the first cataract to the beginning of the Delta.² Merimde also produced the earliest conclusive evidence of true farming within Egypt. The inhabitants of this unwallled Lower Egyptian town first lived in shelters made of reeds. Later they built oval houses of wickerwork (rushes woven between sticks) and engaged in trade with both Palestine and Upper Egypt. It was probably through contacts with the Southern Levant that

Egyptians learned to cultivate barley and wheat. Not long after its appearance at Merimde, farming was also being practiced in the Faiyum Oasis just west of the Nile.

The practice of growing cereal crops and domesticating animals gradually spread through the Delta and then up the Nile. By about 4000 BCE, farming villages existed throughout Egypt. Fishing and fowling seem to have remained important occupations in these villages, while hunting gradually gave way to the raising of sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs. Gathering was totally replaced by farming. Although agriculture became common to both areas, the cultures of Lower and Upper Egypt remained distinct. Archaeologists designate the early cultural assemblages of the Delta “Merimde,” and those in the Faiyum are called “Faiyum A.” The Upper Egyptian culture of this time (c. 5000–4000 BCE) is known as “Badarian” after Badari, the site where it was first discovered. Toby Wilkinson has argued that the Badarians were in close contact with the cattle-herders of Egypt’s Eastern Desert and were strongly influenced by them. Thus, as we have seen, he traces many of the features of later Egyptian civilization to the groups living in the steppe area that became the Eastern and Western Deserts (Wilkinson 2013: 179–195).

The Merimde culture in the north was succeeded around 4000 BCE by one called Omari A, while the Badarian assemblages of Upper Egypt evolved into those known as Naqada I (or Amratian). During this time, pottery became better fired and for the first time, carved stone vessels, known earlier at Merimde, appeared in the south. However, tools and weapons were still made almost entirely of wood, stone, and bone. One of the biggest differences between the northern and southern Egyptian cultures was their burial practices. The Omari people buried their dead in graves dug within their villages, possibly under the floors of their huts. The Naqada I groups buried their dead in cemeteries in the desert outside of their villages and towns. The successors of these dual cultures persisted until about 3100 to 3000 BCE, when Egypt attained a degree of cultural unity during the latter stages of the Naqada II Period (see [Chapter 3](#)).

Major Changes in Lifestyle during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Periods

Major Social, Economic, and Political Developments of the Neolithic Age

As we have seen, the most important socioeconomic development of the Neolithic Period was the Agricultural Revolution. By 6000 BCE, sedentary agricultural societies existed throughout the Near East. Few communities in the region still lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering, though some continued a seminomadic existence while herding domesticated animals (mostly sheep and goats). Agriculture led to a large increase in population (probably due mainly to the higher birth rate of sedentary groups). Long-distance trade became common, allowing groups in Palestine or Mesopotamia to have access to Anatolian obsidian and metals. Meanwhile, people living in the mountains could have jewelry made from seashells from the Mediterranean or the Persian Gulf. Society also benefited from the many technological advances of this era. Neolithic people learned to make strong houses of mud-brick or stone. They learned how to spin thread from flax and wool and weave it into cloth for garments, sacks, sails, and other useful items. They learned to exploit animals for milk, cheeses, and wool and harness cattle for transport and traction. In time, they created spindles and looms to do this job more efficiently. They created pottery vessels, learned to fire them in ovens, and toward the end of the era, developed the pottery wheel that allowed them to mass-produce utilitarian wares. The creation of efficient ovens not only resulted in hard, impermeable pottery, but also in better food products, such as bread and beer. By the latter part of the Neolithic Period, many groups were able to make ovens hot enough to melt copper, allowing them to mold copper tools and ornaments. Thus, the last phases of the Neolithic Age are sometimes called the Chalcolithic (Copper/Stone) Period. Neolithic people also developed irrigation techniques that allowed agriculture to spread to some areas with too little rainfall for dry farming. Major societal changes accompanied the technological ones. Organized religion with communal temples and an associated priesthood first developed during the Neolithic. The development of the commercial economy can be seen with the introduction of stamp seals and sealings during the Halaf Period. These are small engraved circular stones that when impressed in wet clay act as a way of identifying ownership and restrict access to goods. Society probably shifted from egalitarian to one in which elite domination persisted.

These developments also had some negative side effects. Larger communities of people living in close quarters increased the incidence and fatality rates of infectious diseases. Moreover, reliance on agriculture seems to have greatly reduced dietary variety, which also impacted health. Studies of skeletal remains have indicated that Neolithic agriculturalists often suffered from malnutrition (mostly due to lack of meat protein and vitamin and mineral deficiencies). They had badly worn and abscessed teeth (from bits of sand and stone in their stone-ground grain) and a shorter and less robust stature than

their hunter-gatherer predecessors. Women's spines and big toes were often permanently deformed and arthritic from the many hours females spent on their knees with bent backs and sharply flexed toes while grinding grain. These various health problems resulted in a decreased life expectancy and an overall reduction in quality of life for Neolithic agricultural populations.

Debating the Evidence: The Emergence of Social Stratification and Male Dominance

The latter part of the Neolithic Period also saw the advent of labor specialization and a hierarchically organized social system. The archaeological evidence suggests that by the end of the Ubaid Period, there were separate groups of skilled potters, toolmakers, priests, and other specialists in large settlements in Mesopotamia and Khuzistan. Along with specialization came the growth of a privileged ruling class that managed to control most of the society's wealth from both agriculture and trade. Exactly how class distinctions developed and how some individuals were able to make themselves into a wealthy and powerful elite is unknown (Redman 1978: 201–213; Nissen 1988: 58–61; Maisels 1990: 203–220). Some scholars think that class differences were the natural outgrowth of an enlargement of the concept of private property during the sixth millennium. Before that time, there likely was individual ownership of personal ornaments and small objects, but most villages probably held land, tools, and produce in common. In the Late Neolithic Period, the investment of time and effort in building houses, irrigating fields, and storing food seems to have created a broader idea of private ownership. Because some individuals were better than others at what they did (farming, weaving, making pottery, trading, etc.), they produced more wealth that they could claim as their own, and thus, they became members of an affluent elite.

Other scholars argue that a privileged class of priests was the first to emerge because of society's desire for divine help with agricultural processes. The goodwill of deities who control nature was obviously important to early societies, and in Mesopotamia, by the latter stages of the Ubaid Period, towns seem to have been temple-centered. This suggests to some that priests who controlled the religious rites had become dominant.

On the other hand, most Late Ubaid towns and small cities seem to have had defensive walls. This situation presents a stark contrast between the Ubaid and previous periods. With the exception of towns such as Jericho and Çatalhöyük, most pre-Ubaid settlements did not have elaborate provisions for

defense. Thus, some anthropologists have hypothesized that larger populations and increased competition for land and luxury goods resulted in more conflict within individual settlements as well as raiding, looting, and fighting between settlements and societies. Such conflict probably created a need for stronger internal administration and ways to defend fields, stored agricultural surpluses, and other wealth. This need, in turn, would have brought about an increase in the power of local chieftains and capable warriors. According to this theory, the creation of large sedentary populations concentrated in clustered towns and cities eventually led to organized warfare and to governments dominated by kings and a military elite.

As is often the case, there probably is some truth in each of these theories about the development of differences in class status, wealth, and power. The rise of wealthy, propertied individuals, priests, secular authorities, and military leaders seems to have been taking place simultaneously. Moreover, the factors producing these elite factions were not only interrelated, but also operating in ways that mutually supported and strengthened one another.

Finally, many scholars believe that the various changes of the Neolithic Period resulted in a lowered status for women. In hunting-gathering bands, men and women share in food production—men usually hunt animals, while women do most of the gathering of plant foods. Such groups are almost always quite small, usually consisting of only fifteen to forty people, often members of a single extended family. In these groups (which most anthropologists label “band societies”), all of the adult members usually have roughly equal status and material resources. The change to a sedentary lifestyle and reliance on agriculture changed such egalitarian groups. Some scholars have argued that initially, the Agricultural Revolution actually elevated the position of women within society. Relying principally upon the widespread occurrence of female “fertility” figurines, these scholars believe that early Neolithic agricultural groups saw a mother goddess as the source of life and women as her human counterparts. Thus, supposedly, early farming cultures accorded women very high rank, possibly even becoming matriarchies—societies ruled by women (Gimbutas 1990, 1999; Goodison and Morris 1999). Most scholars doubt that matriarchal societies have ever existed. But whether or not there ever was a “prehistoric matriarchy” (and the available evidence does not allow us to absolutely settle this issue), it is clear that by the time written records emerge in the Near East, women not only did not rule, they were no longer even equals. Society was patriarchal, with men controlling the family, property, and the state. A possible reason for the change in women’s status was the fact that sedentary life required them to spend more time bearing and raising children. In nomadic societies, the hard work performed by a woman (from gathering food to carrying gear when on the move) usually results in her having children

several years apart. Why this is true—whether it is planned or due to biological changes that reduce fertility for a time (such as breastfeeding) or caused by natural abortions brought on by hard work—is unknown. However, the intervals between the successful pregnancies of sedentary women are much shorter. Their higher birth rate gradually led to population increases, although the higher infant mortality rate of early agricultural societies kept the population from growing too quickly. Pregnancy, delivery, and caring for infants limited the time women could spend in the fields, though they still did some work there as well as working at home grinding grain and preparing food. The introduction of the plow at the end of the Ubaid Period or early in the following Uruk era simply compounded the problem, for it was too heavy for most women to control. Thus, women living in villages and towns generally ceased being equal partners in food production and became primarily concerned with childbirth, childcare, housework, and food preparation.

Though the role of women as mothers was extremely important, it was not as highly valued by society as the more “productive” occupations of men. Thus, the status of men grew as that of women declined. Also, during the process of animal domestication, people probably became aware of the male’s role in producing offspring. This knowledge seems to have reduced an earlier awe of females as “life givers.” In some places, in fact, men’s sperm began to be thought of as the true source of life, which was just implanted in female receptacles. Finally, as strife between groups increased, male warriors became increasingly important. For these and possibly other unknown reasons, by the advent of writing, males dominated Near Eastern households and societies.

Notes

1. Ubaid 1 was used to designate the Eridu assemblage that previously was the earliest known in southern Mesopotamia, and Ubaid 2 was adopted for the cultural phase previously called Hajji Muhammad.
2. These terms reflect the topography of Egypt and derive from the fact that the Nile River flows from south to north. Lower Egypt is the flat Delta where the Nile enters the Mediterranean. Upper Egypt is the higher area from which the Nile flows.

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The Dawn of Civilization in Western Asia

Although important developments such as domestication of plants and animals, creation of pottery, and the growth of agricultural villages and towns had occurred in the Near East during earlier millennia, the fourth millennium BCE has assumed momentous importance in human history. It was during this era that significant new elements such as urbanization, complex societies, state formation, and writing culminated in the emergence within the Near East of the world's earliest civilizations. We now know that these developments began to take shape at the end of the fifth millennium BCE in northern Mesopotamia, but for reasons not fully understood, only fully developed in southern Mesopotamia from where it spread to other areas of western Asia, as we shall see in this chapter.

The Emergence of Mesopotamian Civilization (c. 4000–3000 BCE)

The Urban Revolution

At the end of the fifth millennium, very large and complex sites arose for the first time, not just as previously believed in southern Iraq, but also in the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates valley in modern-day Syria. Several sites in this area show the earliest hallmarks of an urban society: large and dense concentrations of people, monumental public buildings, specialized production of goods, and pronounced social hierarchies. These are most obvious at the site of Tell Brak, where a large city of almost 618 acres (250 hectares) stood between 4200 and 3400 BCE. Similar processes can be found at other sites in this northern region such as Tell Hamoukar, Arslantepe, and Tepe Gawra. Both

Hamoukar and Brak have evidence for organized religion in the form of “eye idols,” small, stylized stone figures of people or gods emphasizing an oversized pair of eyes. Both sites, however, went into decline around 3400 BCE, and instead the processes of urbanization and state formation found their full fruition in the expanding cities of southern Mesopotamia.

Around 4000 BCE, the Ubaid culture in southern Mesopotamia evolved into that of the succeeding Uruk Period (c. 4000–3100 BCE). The Uruk culture, in turn, developed into that of the Jemdet Nasr era (c. 3100–2900 BCE; see [Table 2.1](#)). During these periods, population increased much more rapidly than in previous eras, and many new settlements appeared in the south. There is still no consensus to account for the rapid growth in this period. Both the influx of populations from elsewhere and the settling down of formerly nomadic groups could have contributed to the rapid increase of settlement density (Pollock 2001; Algaze 2013: 74).

While new villages continued to be created, the growing population became more disproportionately concentrated in towns and small urban centers. Towns (with a minimum of 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants) are usually four or five times larger than villages. A small urban area (containing at least 5,000 people) is normally twice as large as a typical town and more than twenty times larger than most villages. During the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr Periods, while the number of southern Mesopotamian villages increased from about 17 to 124, towns multiplied from three to twenty, and small urban centers from one to twenty (McAdams and Nissen 1972: 18). Estimates place 50 to 70 percent of the total population in towns or cities in the Early and Late Uruk Periods respectively (Algaze 2013: 73).

Table 2.1 The Chronology of Early Sumer

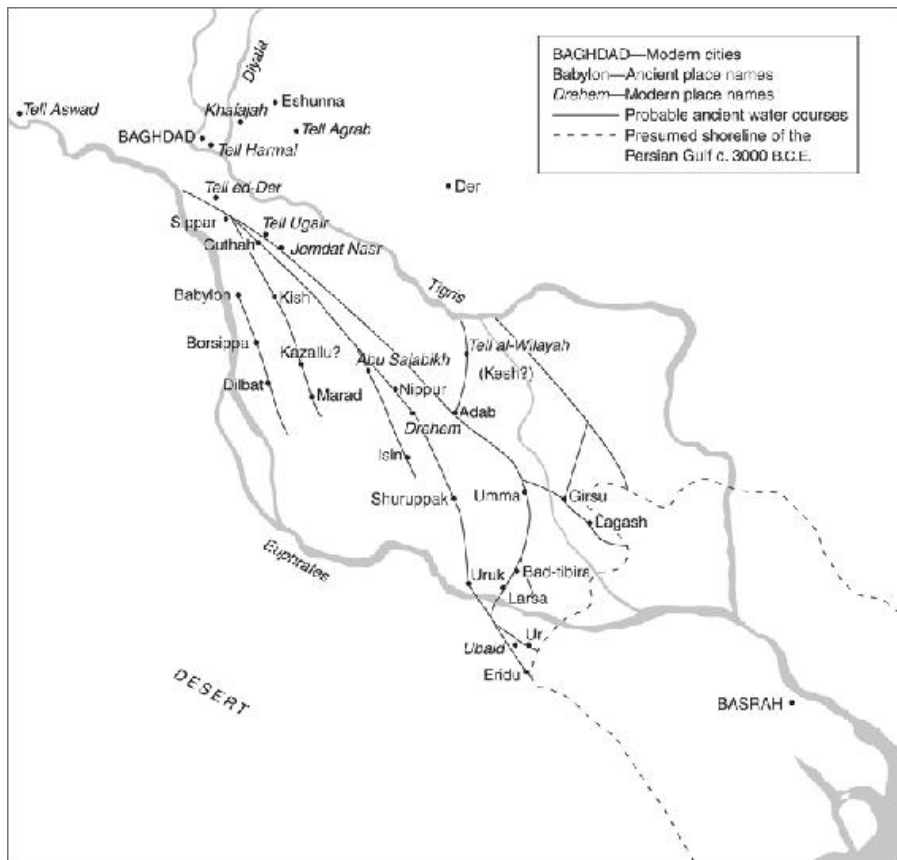
The Uruk Period	4000–3100 BCE
Early Uruk	4000–3400 BCE
Late Uruk	3400–3100 BCE
The Jemdet Nasr Period	3100–2900 BCE
The Early Dynastic Period	2900–2330 BCE
Early Dynastic I	2900–2700 BCE
Early Dynastic II	2700–2600 BCE
Early Dynastic III	2600–2330 BCE

There were three large cities of 74–123.5 acres (30–50 hectares) north of Babylon, but none compared to the urban center of the south, the site of Uruk (called Erech in Genesis 10:10 and Ezra 4:9). Through the fourth millennium Uruk showed enormous growth, tripling in size to an enormous 988 acres (400 hectares) at the beginning of the third millennium and was probably

surrounded by a wall. In the fourth millennium BCE, the population of Uruk grew from about 10,000 people to around 40,000 to 50,000.

High population density is not the only criterion for urbanism, and Uruk exhibited other urban characteristics as well. It had monumental temples, and these testify to the existence of agricultural surpluses, a concentration of wealth, and strong leadership or governmental organization. Specialized goods such as mass-produced pottery and finely wrought stone vases and sculpture show the differentiation of the economy into varied specialized sectors. As in later times, evidence suggests the economy was dependent on agricultural surplus and finished woolen textiles. In exchange for these goods, Uruk imported metal, stone, and other raw materials such as timber. Moreover, Uruk seems to have been the hub of a regional economic system, a characteristic feature of later cities. While Uruk was vastly increasing its size, many of the small villages closest to it were abandoned, suggesting that Uruk's growth was mainly due to migration from the countryside into the city. On the other hand, villages and towns a bit farther away became economically (and probably politically) linked to Uruk. Meanwhile, similar developments, but on a slightly smaller scale, were taking place at other Mesopotamian sites such as Eridu, Ur, Umma, Shuruppak, and Nippur (see [Map 2.1](#)). As these cities grew, they seem to have organized older or newly created villages and towns into urban-centered economic and political complexes we refer to as city-states. V. Gordon Childe called this era when cities and urban institutions began to develop and flourish "The Urban Revolution."

Scholars have suggested many explanations to account for the rapid urbanization and rise of the state in southern Mesopotamia at this time. Early theories focused on systems of labor control needed for extensive irrigation agriculture (Wittfogel 1957), the specialization of agricultural production in Mesopotamia, and the subsequent need for exchange (Adams 1966). Recent discussions focus on ecological arguments. In the Uruk Period, southern Mesopotamia was much wetter than at present and most southern Mesopotamian sites were situated in marshy wetlands with boat access to one another and to the Gulf, which reached nearly to Ur, Eridu, and Lagash at that time (Pournelle 2013: 28; see [Map 2.1](#)). Uruk, with its access to waterways for transportation and with a diversified economy based on fishing, livestock rearing (especially sheep), and date palm cultivation was optimally positioned to evolve into a complex society through the accumulation of agricultural surplus and control of trade (Algaze 2008).



Map 2.1 Major Urban Centers of Southern Mesopotamia

Charles Keith Maisels, *The Emergence of Civilization: From Hunting and Gathering to Agriculture, Cities, and the State in the Near East* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), Map 5.2.

One of the characteristic artifacts of the Late Uruk Period (c. 3400–3100 BCE) was a gray bowl with an angled or beveled rim. These beveled-rim bowls all were about the same size, and potters seem to have mass produced them by pressing sheets of clay into molds. The resulting vessels were so coarse and crudely made that they would not hold liquids, yet at some sites they constitute more than 75 percent of the excavated pottery. Hans Nissen has argued that these bowls served as standard measuring devices and were handed out filled with grain to those receiving daily rations (1988: 83–85). Other scholars suggest that these bowls were used for baking bread and, thus, indicate bread rations (Millard 1988; Oates 2012: 482). The beveled-rim bowls may be evidence for the existence of a standardized system of weights and measures and a redistributive economy like that of the later Sumerian city-states. This type of economy is a managed system in which production is

controlled by a central institution (such as a temple or the government) that collects goods and products and then doles them out to workers or dependents according to rank, need, or other criteria. It would appear that already in the Uruk Period, the temple was the most important economic institution of the time. The massive temples, now raised on large mud-brick platforms (see [Figure 2.2](#)), physically dominated the urban landscape and commanded large workforces to build and decorate as well as precious resources such as stone and wood. By the end of the Uruk Period, several lines of evidence indicate the dominance of a male ruler who is sometimes referred to as a “priest king,” as he is assumed to hold both secular and sacred functions. In the very earliest written documents that appear for the first time in the Late Uruk Period, various “leaders” of the city, of the law, and of the troops are listed. At the top of the list stands the NAMEŠDA, a term that is later translated as “king” and seems therefore to indicate such a position at Uruk at this time. The elite art of Late Uruk highlights just such a figure. A male individual wearing a distinctive costume and hairdo is portrayed on several works of art from Uruk in both ritual and warlike roles (see [Figure 2.1](#)). For the first time, both texts and images

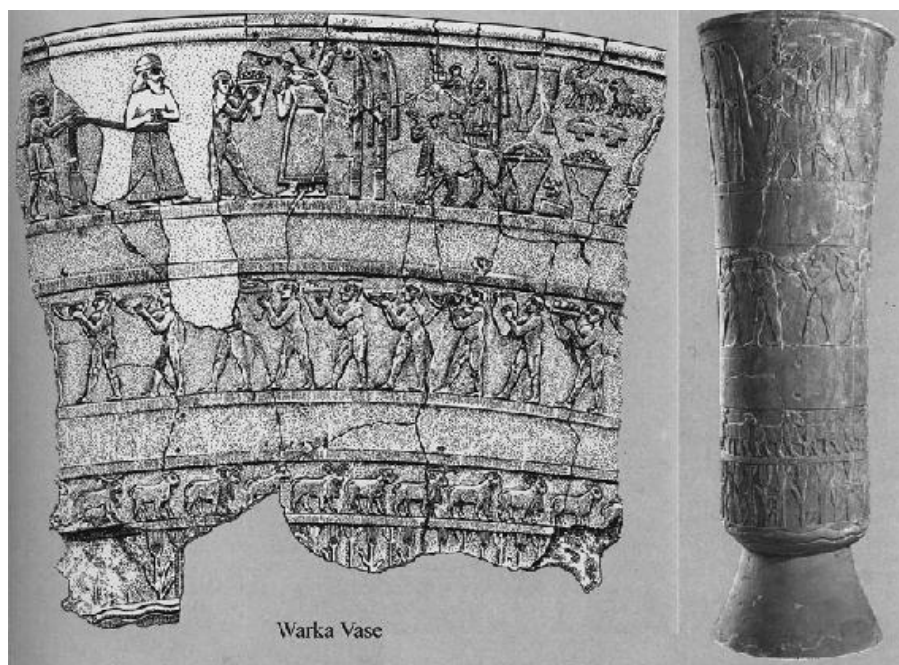


Figure 2.1 The Uruk Vase

This ceremonial vase depicts the “priest king” bringing offerings to the goddess Inanna. Some view this as a depiction of the Sacred Marriage ritual, but at the very least it demonstrates the ruler’s control of the economy and his role in the city cult (see [Chapter 3](#)).

highlight an important role for warfare in Uruk society, perhaps to be connected with the Uruk expansion we will discuss later.

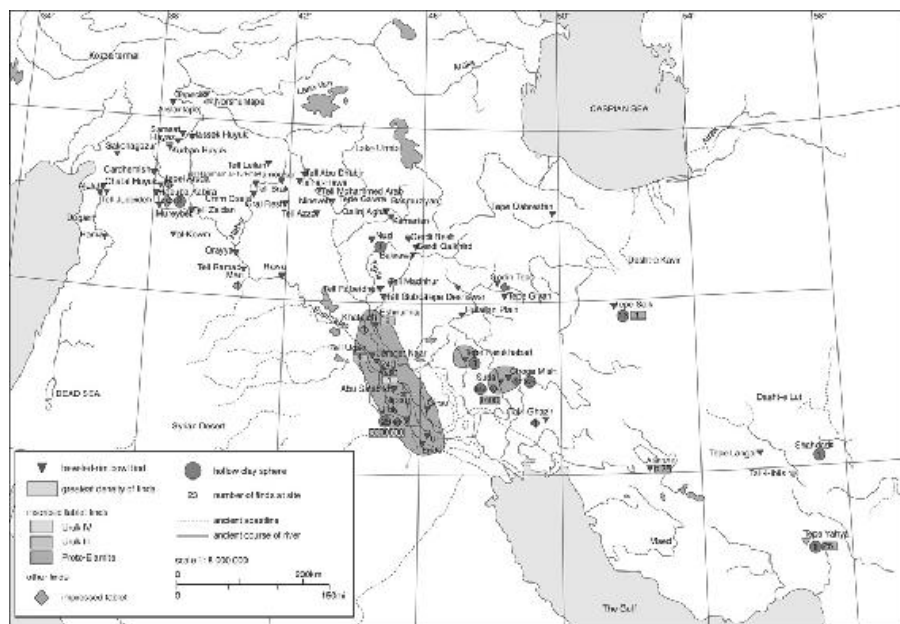
Like the Ubaid culture before it, the Uruk urban culture expanded beyond the confines of southern Mesopotamia. Characteristic pottery, architecture, and other features of the Late Uruk Period have been found at sites as distant as northern Iran, southeastern Turkey, and Egypt. While some of the Uruk-style objects found outside of southern Mesopotamia were probably due to trade (as was the spread of Ubaid pottery), at many sites something more was almost certainly involved. Finds of many beveled-rim bowls (which clearly were not desirable trade objects) suggest the spread of the redistributive economic system. Furthermore, people as well as concepts and objects seem to have been streaming out of lower Mesopotamia. Carchemish, Samsat, and Hassek Hüyük in southeastern Turkey; Habuba Kabira and nearby sites in Syria; Tell Brak, Nineveh, and several other sites in northern Mesopotamia; and Godin Tepe and other sites in northwestern Iran probably contained settlements of southern Mesopotamian emigrants (see [Map 2.2](#)). Several of these Uruk “colonies” were cities containing at least 5,000 people that had often been founded on virgin soil (Habuba Kabira) or had totally replaced the remains of earlier occupants (Tell Brak). For the most part, their artifactual repertoire reflects that of Uruk, while few elements of the local cultures were present. At some sites, the Uruk people settled within already existing local communities (Godin Tepe, Hacinebi). Nevertheless, even in these cases, the Uruk colonies usually remained culturally distinct, and sometimes, as at Godin Tepe in northern Iran, the colonists built walls around their quarters to separate them from the precincts of the natives.

The reason why this Uruk expansion took place is not known. One suggestion is that the colonies were trading posts created because of the southern Mesopotamians’ need to secure raw materials and to control trade, especially in metals, timber, and salt (Algaze 1989; 1993: 2–5). Certainly, they were nearly all situated at important transit points at river crossings and trade routes. Others suggest that some or most of these settlements resulted from political expansion through territorial conquest (Algaze 1993: 9–10; Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995: 150–151). Both could be true, with the impetus for expansion changing over time. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that the first unequivocal evidence for warfare has been found at an Uruk Period site in modern Syria called Tell Hamoukar. A destruction layer and piles of stone “sling” balls can be dated to c. 3400 BCE. While it is impossible to identify the perpetrators of the battle at Hamoukar, Uruk pottery dominates the site

thereafter. Evidence for warfare at this time also comes from Uruk itself, where foreign captives are listed among those receiving rations in the very earliest texts (Algaze 2013: 81).

The beginnings of the Uruk expansion into Iran and the Upper Euphrates region began around 3600 BCE and came to an abrupt end before the end of the Late Uruk Period. Outright colonies were created in the Late Uruk Period c. 3400 BCE and existed for less than two centuries. Generally, the areas where the colonies had been situated continued their older cultural practices as if this interlude had never occurred. After the disintegration of the Uruk expansion close contacts between northern Mesopotamia and northern Syria on the one hand, and alluvial Mesopotamia on the other, did not resume again until the Early Dynastic Period after c. 2900 BCE.

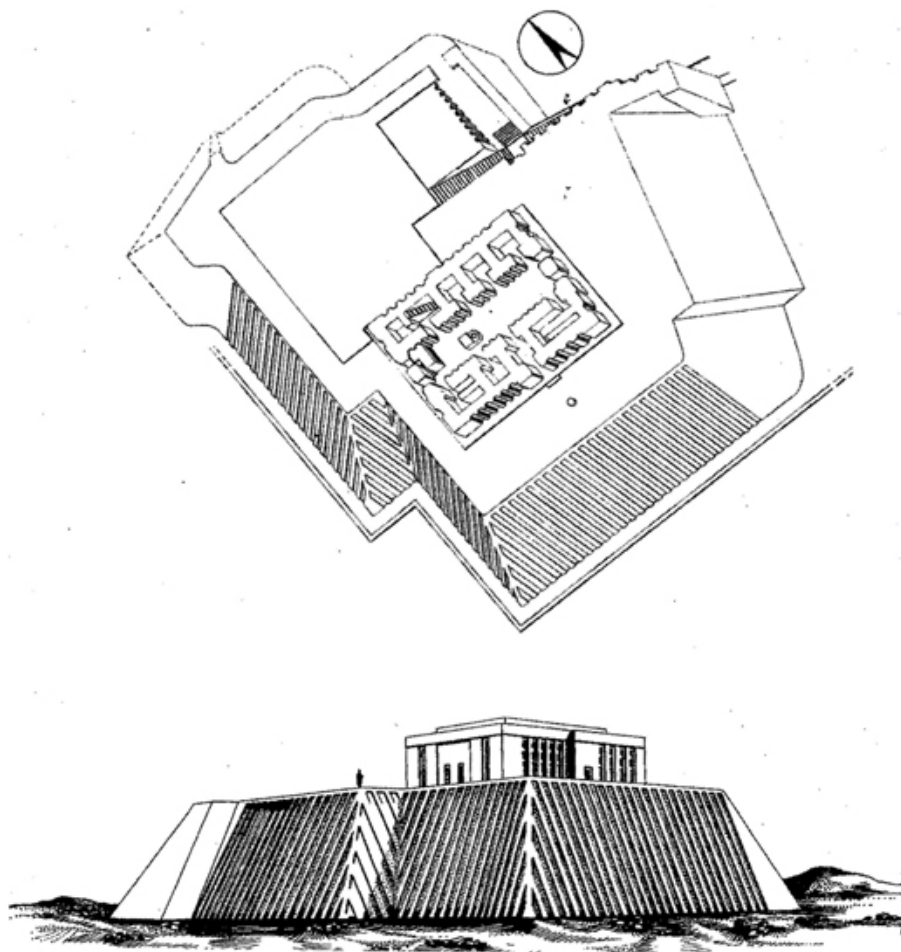
In addition to urbanization, three other characteristic features of later Mesopotamian civilization emerged around 3400 BCE: the construction of monumental temples on high platforms, cylinder seals, and texts written on clay tablets. Uruk Period temples, typified by the examples excavated at Uruk and Eridu, evolved from those of the Ubaid Period. These structures usually consisted of a long central room containing an altar and offering table with several smaller rooms opening off the two long sides. The exteriors of the temples had many



Map 2.2 Uruk Expansion

Adapted from Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (Andromeda Books, 1996), pp. 64–65.

buttresses, creating an inset-offset paneled effect, and they were often decorated with mosaics of painted clay cones or “nails” set into their surfaces. Earlier temples had been built on low brick or stone platforms, and when a new temple was constructed on the same site, its platform usually incorporated the ruins of its predecessors (see [Figure 1.7](#) in [Chapter 1](#)). By the Jemdet Nasr Period, after centuries of building and rebuilding on the same sites, temple platforms became significant monuments in their own right, raising the temples high above the cities’ other structures (see [Figure 2.2](#)). This process would continue into the Sumerian Early Dynastic Age and would eventually result in the stepped, pyramid-like structures known as ziggurats on which major Mesopotamian temples would stand in later times.



[Figure 2.2](#) Reconstruction of the White Temple and Platform at Uruk, c. 3200 BCE

Alternate Rendition of Drawing in M.E.L. Mallowan, *Early Mesopotamia and Iran*. (London:

The cylinder seal also seems to have been introduced during the Late Uruk Period. Beginning in the Late Neolithic Period, inhabitants of the Near East had produced stamp seals that were small pieces of stone with a flat circular or square surface bearing a carved design. Stamp seals were used to make impressions on clay objects to indicate ownership, to magically protect property, and to prevent tampering. Around 3400 BCE, however, people in the city of Uruk began using a new type of seal. The design for this seal was carved on the outer surface of a cylinder of stone or metal usually one to two inches long and one-half to three-fourths of an inch in diameter. A hole was drilled lengthwise down the center of the cylinder so a string could be passed through it, allowing it to hang around the neck. It could also be mounted on a metal or wooden axle. Such cylinder seals would be rolled across damp clay surfaces, leaving impressions of their carved designs. Though some Mesopotamians continued to use stamp seals on occasion, cylinder seals were found to be more efficient. The design on a cylinder seal could be rolled out continuously, covering (and thus securing) a larger area than a stamp seal. The development of the cylinder seal as a bureaucratic tool goes hand in hand with the rising social and economic complexity of urban life in the Uruk Period. By the end of the Uruk Period (c. 3100 BCE), the use of cylinder seals had spread to other southern Mesopotamian sites and to Uruk colonies elsewhere. Examples from this time have also been found at other sites in Iran, Syria, and Egypt. The cylinder seal remained a hallmark of Mesopotamian culture throughout ancient times.

The Development of Cuneiform Writing

The earliest known written texts in Mesopotamia were found in Level IV at Uruk and date to about 3400 to 3100 BCE. They consist of cushion-shaped lumps of clay with word signs and numerical symbols that had been scratched into their surfaces with a pointed object while the clay was still damp. Because many of the drawings were representations of recognizable things (donkeys, cows, grain, fish, etc.), they used to be designated “pictographs” or “picture writing.” However, some of the signs (for example, those for sheep, wool, garment, perfume, and the numerals) seem to be arbitrary symbols for words or ideas rather than pictorial representations of physical objects. Most scholars prefer to characterize the signs on these texts as logograms (signs used to represent words) or ideograms (signs used to represent ideas) (see [Figure 2.3](#)). Logographic texts became more common during the following Jemdet Nasr

Period (c. 3100–2900 BCE). Since this early script shows clear affinities with the later cunei-form writing system of Mesopotamia, scholars refer to it as “proto-cuneiform.” The importance of the appearance of writing has led some scholars to use the term Protoliterate (“first writing”) Period for the time from the latter part of the Uruk through the Jemdet Nasr eras. Students of early writing once thought that some brilliant inhabitant of Uruk had invented the logographic writing system from scratch (Gelb 1963), but we now know that it had antecedents. Furthermore, similar writing systems developed in northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Iran, and Egypt at about the same time as writing’s appearance in southern Mesopotamia.

Record keeping in some form seems to go back to the Late Paleolithic Period. Early humans seem to have kept track of the movements of the sun and moon and made primitive calendars by cutting various kinds of grooves into pieces of bone. About a millennium after the beginning of the agricultural revolution, someone (probably in the Zagros region) developed a method for keeping track of possessions, trade, debts, or other transactions by using small, various-shaped pieces of clay (called tokens) to represent some commodities and numbers. The use of clay tokens, mostly cones, disks, spheres, and other geometrical shapes, spread over much of the Near East. Archaeologists have found sixth through fourth millennium BCE examples at sites from the Indus River to southwestern Turkey, with the greatest concentration occurring in western Iran and Mesopotamia. Egyptians do not seem to have adopted the token system, though a few early examples were found at Khartoum in southern Nubia.

In the fourth millennium BCE, people began to seal tokens in hollow clay balls (called **bullae**) whose outer surfaces bore impressions corresponding to the shapes and number of the tokens they contained. Sometimes these bullae were also impressed with the images from stamp or cylinder seals. In a later stage the stamped bullae were flattened into cushion-shaped tablets with impressions of numerical tokens. Denise Schmandt-Besserat has argued (1978: 50–59; 1992) that the practice of impressing token shapes on bullae probably helped inspire the Late Uruk Period idea of drawing various shapes on convex cushion-shaped clay tablets and dispensing with the tokens themselves.

Proposed as Antecedent	Logogram	Early Dynastic (signs rotated 90°)	Old Babylonian	Neo-Assyrian	Value (WORD; syllable)	Logographic meaning
					Ti; ti	Arrow; Life
					NINDA, NIG, GAR; sha, nik, niq, gar	(Bowl of) Food; Bread; Treasure; to put or place
					UDU, LU; lu	Sheep; Fat
					AB; ab, lid, lit, rim	Cow
					KUR; kur, qur, mat, mad, shad, shat, sad, sat, nad, nat, lad, lat	Mountain; Country

Figure 2.3 The Development of Cuneiform Writing

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Assyriologists have accepted only part of this claim, however. They point out that only *some* tokens, mostly the spherical and cone-shaped ones used for numerals, have been found in and impressed on bullae. The differentiation of the types and sizes of those numerical symbols “could have been an important step in the process which led to writing” because numerals shaped like the tokens continued to be impressed into early clay tablets alongside logograms scratched into the clay (Lieberman 1980: 343). On the other hand, they argue, the token system could not have been the sole inspiration for the development of writing, for many of the tokens seen as ancestral to writing are not found in bullae and those tokens found at Uruk do not antedate the earliest writing, but are contemporary with it. There are more than 2,000 different signs on early logographic tablets, but only eighty or so have been traced to tokens. Moreover, many of the tokens that are supposed to be antecedents to writing are not found at Uruk, but only at Susa or other sites. Also, because many of

the tokens are flat representations of three-dimensional objects (such as the cow's head in [Figure 2.3](#)), they may be derived from the two-dimensional drawings on tablets rather than the other way around. Some were pierced and may have been used for jewelry, others as toys or something else (Lieberman 1980: 353–357). Writing therefore seems to have developed alongside the older means of recording in response to the pressures produced by constantly growing towns and cities and their more complex administrative needs (Nissen 1995). It is no coincidence that writing first fully develops at Uruk itself. While the earlier numeric-ideographic tablets are found all over the Near East, at Susa, western Iran, Tell Brak, and Nineveh, full pictographic or “proto-cuneiform” is only found at Uruk (Cooper 2004).

In the succeeding Jemdet Nasr Period, c. 3100–2900 BCE, writing became more stylized and spread to many other sites around southern Mesopotamia. Writing also developed at other centers such as Egypt and Iran at around the same time. Whether they developed under the influence of Mesopotamian cuneiform is still an open question, but likely. As has been mentioned, there is evidence of Uruk Period objects in Egypt, and Egyptian objects were found at Habuba Kabira and at contemporary sites in Palestine. As there was contact among Iran, Mesopotamia, and Syria, and between Egypt and Syria (and possibly between Egypt and Mesopotamia), it is likely that information about early experiments with writing was passed back and forth, stimulating parallel developments. Thus, as Assyriologist C.B.F. Walker remarked, “It is beginning to look as if we should think in terms of the invention of writing as being a gradual process, accomplished over a wide area, rather than the product of a single Sumerian genius” (1990: 19). This is only partly true, for the leap from primitive numeric tablets with one or two signs to a fully logographic writing occurred at Uruk only and is thus likely the work of that “Sumerian genius.”

The earliest logographic writing seems to have been used essentially to keep economic records, although archaeologists have also found several tablets containing lists of signs (probably for training scribes). There is no way to determine for certain the language spoken by those who made these logographic tablets, for the drawing of a human head conveys the same idea in any language, whether the word for it is “head” (English), *sag* (Sumerian), or some other term. Ties between the earliest signs and the Sumerian language have not been firmly established. However, during the Jemdet Nasr Period (c. 3100–2900 BCE), southern Mesopotamian scribes began using their signs not just for words or ideas, but also as symbols for the *sounds* of the words or ideas they represented. The signs thus sometimes became syllabograms representing syllables, and could be used to write any word in the spoken language, even foreign names or terms. For example, “life” cannot be depicted, but the picture of an arrow began to be used for the word “life” (see [Figure](#)

2.3). Both words were probably pronounced “tee” (*ti*) in Sumerian, so the arrow sign could be used not only for the words “arrow” and “life” (and “rib” as well), but also for the sound “tee” in any other word. The drawing of a head could be used not only as a logogram for the word “head” or as a symbol for its sound “sag,” but also for the similar sounds “sak” and “saq.” Moreover, sometimes the same sign could be used for two or more words that were pronounced differently, and those words could add to the possible syllables the sign was used to represent. These various features allow scholars to recognize that by the time Mesopotamian writing became at least partially syllabographic, the language being written was Sumerian.

The Sumerian tongue is in a class by itself; it does not belong in any of the families of languages (Semitic, Indo-European, etc.) known at present. Some scholars (e.g., Parpola 2010) consider it a member of the Uralic language family (including Finnish), but this is in dispute. However, this language was especially well suited for the development of syllabographic writing from a logographic system. Sumerian largely consisted of monosyllabic words and had many homophones (i.e., words with the same sound but different meanings). Homophones include words such as “pear” and “pare” in English and the Sumerian words *ti* (“rib,” “arrow,” and “life”) and *gu* (“ox” and “thread”). To distinguish in writing between words that might be confused with one another or misunderstood, the Sumerians added signs called determinatives. These signs, generally logograms, would not be read aloud when the text was read, but would provide help to the reader by indicating the category of the word that followed. For example, the logogram for *gish* (“wood”) would be placed before words for objects made of wood; the logogram for *dingir* (“god”) would be placed before names of deities; or the logogram for *kur* (“mountain” and “country”) would be placed before the names of mountains, geographical regions, or nations.

Soon after they started drawing logographic signs on tablets, Mesopotamian scribes began stylizing them, replacing curved lines with straight ones that were easier to make on clay. Eventually, they stopped *drawing* the signs altogether, and instead, began impressing the lines into the clay with a reed or wooden stylus cut on an angle. The blunt shape of the stylus’ tip produced the characteristic wedge-shaped impressions that led early scholars to call Mesopotamian writing cuneiform (from the Latin word for wedge, *cuneus*). For reasons still not fully understood (Walker 1990: 24), at some time during the Early Dynastic Period, the direction of cuneiform writing changed from columns running top to bottom, right to left, to lines running left to right, top to bottom. At the same time, the signs were all rotated 90 degrees, written sideways instead of vertically.

It must be recognized that cuneiform is a *script*, not a language, and could

and did record many different languages in ancient times (just as the Latin script is used to record languages as varied as French, English, German, and Turkish). In due course, those Mesopotamians who spoke a Semitic¹ language modified the cuneiform writing system to record their own speech (which we call Akkadian). These people read the logograms in their own language rather than as Sumerian words, so they often created additional syllabic values for the signs based on their pronunciation in Akkadian. For example, the Akkadian word for “mountain” was *shad*, and for “country” was *matu*. So the sign for “mountain” or “country” (*kur* in Sumerian) came to be used not only for the syllables “kur” and “qur,” but also for “shad,” “mat,” and similar sounds (see Figure 2.3).

As time passed, the signs evolved to look less and less like the objects that they originally represented. They became simply standardized symbols that could be logograms representing one or more words or ideas, determinatives to help the reader understand the following sign(s), or signs for one or more possible syllables. Because literacy was created to meet the needs of large economic institutions, it was naturally limited to elite circles and a small scribal class.

Debating the Evidence: The Origin of the Sumerians

Because the earliest partially syllabographic texts of southern Mesopotamia were written in Sumerian, most scholars assume that Sumerian was also the language of the people who created the logographic texts of Late Uruk and early Jemdet Nasr times. However, there is still some disagreement about whether the Sumerians were in Mesopotamia *before* the Late Uruk Period. Some experts have claimed that the Sumerians were newcomers to Mesopotamia who arrived only c. 3400 BCE, just before writing began (Jones 1969: 19; Kramer 1963: 40–43; Hallo and Simpson 1998: 19–23). The most important evidence for this view comes from study of the Sumerian language. The Sumerian words for the Tigris (*idigna*) and Euphrates (*buranun*) Rivers and for many of southern Mesopotamia’s most important cities (including Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Isin, Lagash, Nippur, and Kish) do not seem to be Sumerian (though some, like Albright 1971, dispute that assertion). Also, many of the basic words for agriculture (such as the words for plow, furrow, date palm, farmer) and craftsmen (such as metalworker, potter, carpenter, mason) seem to be non-Sumerian. Thus, these scholars argue, the Sumerians must have found agriculture, crafts, and cities already well established when they arrived. Since the first settlements in southern Mesopotamia were created during the Ubaid

Period, and the earliest cities arose during the Uruk Period, the Sumerians could have come to Mesopotamia no earlier than the latter part of the Uruk era.

The primary Sumerian contribution to the development of Mesopotamian civilization supposedly was the creation of writing (or at least, of syllabographic writing), though some think they may also have been responsible for the introduction of cylinder seals and a few other cultural elements. However, supporters of this theory of a relatively late Sumerian immigration into Mesopotamia do not agree on the location of the original Sumerian homeland. The Sumerian language is unrelated to any other known at present, so it does not provide any hints about their roots. Some scholars suggest that the Sumerians arrived by sea from the Persian Gulf, placing their origins somewhere to the south or east of Mesopotamia. Others argue for movements from the north near the Caspian Sea or overland from Iran to the east, or even from India.

The opposing view holds that the Sumerian presence in Mesopotamia goes back to the beginning of the Ubaid Period (c. 5500 BCE) or earlier (Albright 1971; Oates 1986: 20–22; Roux 1992: 80–84). Proponents of this idea rely principally on the fact that there is no archaeological evidence for a new group of settlers in southern Mesopotamia after the beginning of the Ubaid Period. The Ubaid material culture developed gradually into that of the Uruk Period, which in turn evolved into that of the Jemdet Nasr era, which blossomed into the Early Dynastic Sumerian culture. Continuity in temple architecture and worship from the Ubaid era into Sumerian times (especially evidenced by the long succession of temples built on top of one another at Eridu) also suggests continuity in population. Supporters of the Ubaid = Sumerian thesis note that about a thousand years separate the beginning of the Uruk Period from the Sumerian texts of Early Dynastic (ED) times and almost the same amount again between ED I and the Ur III Period from which most of our knowledge of Sumerian syntax and grammar comes. Linguists' failure to recognize etymologies for place names and words created during the early Uruk era or the even earlier Ubaid Period is thus understandable. Moreover, most of the supposedly "non-Sumerian" words do not conform to a coherent substrate language either (Rubio 1999).

The problem of Sumerian origins probably cannot be solved given the limited evidence at our disposal. However, a view that has much to commend it is that ancestors of the Sumerians (possibly from western Iran), Semites, and speakers of other languages all were present in southern Mesopotamia during the Ubaid and Uruk Periods. A few Semitic words in the earliest Sumerian texts suggest as much, as does an article (Whittaker 2005) that posits Indo-European loan words. There must have been a constant stream of immigrants

into alluvial Mesopotamia during those early eras, especially during the Uruk Period. Most of these newcomers probably spoke isolated languages belonging to none of the major language families. Once in Mesopotamia, not only did these various groups adopt a common material culture, but their languages likely also contributed to the Sumerian tongue. As Jerrold Cooper put it, “All of the qualities that we might want to call ‘Sumerian’ emerged and developed only after they were settled in Babylonia and in close contact with other ethno-linguistic groups” (Cooper 1992: 233).

Parallel Developments in Iran c. 4000–3000 BCE

Another civilization, in close contact with and strongly influenced by that of Mesopotamia, arose in western Iran during the Jemdet Nasr Period. Scholars have labeled this culture “Proto-Elamite” because it seems to be an ancestor of the later Elamite state. During the Ubaid Period, Susa was the preeminent site of the region. The site itself was dominated by a high mud-brick terrace which may have once been the base for a ceremonial or religious structure. By the end of the Ubaid, this structure was destroyed and the site partially abandoned. Thereafter, this part of Iran showed closest affiliations with southern Mesopotamia. In fact, there seems to have been an Uruk takeover of the Susiana plain of western Iran c. 3600 BCE. Ties with Uruk likely spurred the subsequent rise of a complex urban society in Iran c. 3200 BCE. Specialized pottery, seals, and tablets written in a new script called “Proto-Elamite” characterize this new culture. The main site for Proto-Elamite culture is Tall-i-Malyan located in the Fars province. By the end of the period (2900 BCE) Malyan was the largest site in Iran at 123.5 acres (50 hectares) and walled.

Proto-Elamite culture derived some of its features from Mesopotamian society, such as certain pottery forms (e.g., the beveled rim bowl), the mastery of written script, and sealing practices. The Iranians copied the methods of writing and the numerical system from Mesopotamia, while the logographic signs are entirely original. Proto-Elamite is one of the few undeciphered ancient languages; its underlying language has yet to be identified. The Proto-Elamite culture expanded beyond the region of Fars by 3100 BCE; Proto-Elamite cultural markers are found at numerous sites on the Iranian plateau stretching from Susa in the west to Tepe Yahya in the east. These artifacts undoubtedly indicate the spread of the systems of economic, social, and political control developed in southwestern Iran and southern Mesopotamia

during the Uruk Period. However, it is not known whether these complex interrelated structures were introduced to other parts of Iran by conquest, merchant colonies, or less direct processes of diffusion. Like the Uruk expansion, Proto-Elamite outposts were also abandoned or destroyed at the end of the fourth millennium BCE with life in much of Iran returning to a pastoral subsistence. “Proto-Elamite” was forgotten, and writing in Iran disappeared for nearly a millennium. In the succeeding third millennium BCE, Mesopotamian sources call this area Elam and record open hostilities with Sumerian city-states. Developments in Iran in the third millennium BCE will be discussed further in [Chapter 4](#).

The Mesopotamian Early Dynastic Period (c. 2900–2330 BCE)

An Era of Independent City-States

As we have noted, in all likelihood people speaking several different languages shared the culture of southern Mesopotamia. Most of the rulers, the upper classes, and the language of the texts, though, were Sumerian. Therefore, the history and culture of the Early Dynastic Period is usually classified as “Sumerian.” Until the beginning of the Early Dynastic I (ED I) Period (c. 2900–2600 BCE), cities had been largely confined to southern Mesopotamia and Elam. However, during ED I, there is a more even distribution of cities on the Mesopotamian plain, and urbanism spread to the Diyala basin northeast of Baghdad and to northern Mesopotamia. In the Diyala area, ten cities developed, including Eshnunna, Tutub (Khafaje), and Tell Agrab (see [Map 2.1](#)). In addition, nineteen towns and sixty-seven villages have been located in the Diyala area by archaeological surveys. In northern Mesopotamia, Ashur, Tell Taya, Tell Khuera, and Mari grew into moderate-sized cities. All of these central and northern sites exhibit strong Sumerian cultural influence even as many of their inhabitants undoubtedly spoke Akkadian (see earlier discussion for distinction between Akkadian and Sumerian). The two areas were linked by north-south canals running along the eastern and western edges of the plain (Ur 2013: 142).

Urbanism continued to progress in the south as well. By the latter part of the Early Dynastic Period, about 80 percent of the southern Mesopotamian population lived in cities that covered more than 100 acres. Uruk’s large

population of 40,000 to 50,000 was unique at the beginning of the third millennium. However, by about 2500 BCE most of the major Mesopotamian cities contained at least 20,000 to 30,000 people, and by that time a few (notably Lagash) were approaching the size of Uruk.

Though Sumerian texts from the ED I Period can be read, they are all economic or lexical in nature and provide almost no historical information. Occasional historical inscriptions appeared during the ED II Period (c. 2700–2500 BCE), and they became more plentiful in ED III times (c. 2500–2330 BCE). These allow us to reconstruct a basic historical outline for this period. In addition, the later *Sumerian King List*, as well as various epics, legends, and religious myths, contain information historians can use to understand the early development of the Sumerian states. However, scholars must exercise caution when trying to draw historical information from these later literary sources.²

The *Sumerian King List* is a literary text that describes the institution of kingship on earth before the Flood, and the passing of hegemony from one city to the next in Mesopotamia. It utilized earlier individual lists from several Sumerian cities, but it was not compiled until about 2100 BCE. By that time, large kingdoms or empires had been created in Mesopotamia, so the author of the *King List* demonstrates that the gods always intended that there be only one ruler on earth at any given time. Thus, the compiler of this work listed the kings of various Sumerian cities as well as those of Mari (in northwestern Mesopotamia), the foreign cities of Awan (the first capital of Elam), and Hamazi (a place in the hills to the northeast of Mesopotamia) in the order in which they are supposed to have dominated the world (see [Document 2.1](#)).

Document 2.1 Excerpts from the *Sumerian King List*

Some scholars date this work to the reign of Utu-hegal, a king of Uruk (c. 2123–2113 BCE), who freed southern Mesopotamia from domination by the Gutians about a century after the collapse of the Akkadian Empire. Others think it was composed around 1900 BCE. The author used king lists from various cities as well as material derived from myths and epics to produce a list of dynasties supporting his view that the gods had always intended Mesopotamia to be united under one king. The following excerpt begins after a mythological pre-Deluge preamble. The translation is by A. Leo Oppenheim (1955: 265–266) with only one slight change in the spelling of SHU-PESH. The material in parentheses and square brackets is part of Oppenheim's translation.

After the Flood had swept over (the earth) (and) when kingship was lowered (again) from heaven, kingship was (first) in Kish.... Kalibum ruled 960 years; Qalumum ruled

840 years; Zuqaqip ruled 900 years; Atab ruled 600 years; [Mashda, son] of Atab ruled 840 years; Arwi'um, son of Mashda, ruled 720 years; Etana, a shepherd, he who ascended to heaven (and) who consolidated all countries, became king and ruled 1,560 (var.: 1,500) years; Balih, son of Etana, ruled 400 (var.: 410) years;... Ilku' ruled 900 years; Ilta-sadum ruled 1,200 years; En-men-barage-si, he who carried away as spoil the "weapon" of Elam, became king and ruled 900 years; Aka, son of En-men-barage-si, ruled 629 years. Twenty-three kings (thus) ruled it for 24,510 years, 3 months, and 3 1/2 days.

Kish was defeated in battle (lit.: was smitten with weapons), its kingship was removed to Eanna (sacred precinct of Uruk).

In Eanna, Mes-kiag-gasher, the son of the (sun) god Utu, became high priest as well as king, and ruled 324 years. Mes-kiag-gasher went (daily) into the (Western) Sea and came forth (again) toward the (Sunrise) Mountains; En-me-kar, son of Mes-kiaggasher, he who built Uruk, became king and ruled 420 years; the god Lugal-banda, a shepherd, ruled 1,200 years; the god Dumu-zi, a SHU-PESH-fisherman—his (native) city was Ku'a(ra)—ruled 100 years; the divine Gilgamesh, his father was a *lillu*, a high priest of Kullab, ruled 126 years; Ur-Nungal (var.: Ur-lugal), son of Gilgamesh, ruled 30 years; Utul-kamma, son of Ur-nun-gal (var.: Ur-lugal), ruled 15 years; Laba[h...]'ir ruled 9 years; En-nun-dara-Anna ruled 8 years;...

Uruk was defeated in battle, its kingship was removed to Ur.

In Ur, Mes-Anne-pada became king, ruled 80 years; Mes-kiag-Nanna became king, ruled 36 years; [Elulu ruled 25 years; Balulu ruled 36 years. Four kings (thus) ruled it for 177 years. Ur was defeated in battle].

Besides the impossibly long reigns of the mythical or legendary pre- and early post-Flood rulers, historians have other good reasons for questioning the accuracy of some aspects of the *Sumerian King List*. The list omits the names of monarchs such as Mesilim (or Mesalim) who titled himself "King of Kish" on several inscribed objects found at Lagash and Adab (see

[Map 2.1](#)). These finds suggest that he controlled a considerable amount of territory around the end of ED II or the beginning of ED III (c. 2600 BCE). It also fails to list A'-anepada, who according to inscriptions was the son and successor of Mesanepada, the first king of Ur's First Dynasty in the *King List*. In addition, the list does not include Lagash or any of its dynasties, though texts make it clear that Lagash was a powerful city-state in the ED III era. Finally, while each of the cities and dynasties listed in the *Sumerian King List* may have had great power and status in Sumer for a while, it is unlikely that any of them actually controlled all of southern Mesopotamia for more than very brief periods of time. There are indications, for instance, that the "first" dynasties of Kish, Uruk, and Ur, placed in succession in the *King List*, in fact were partly contemporaneous, overlapping one another. In many cases, the kings who supposedly ruled over the entire land of Sumer were probably only "firsts among equals."

The later evidence suggests that, unlike the Egyptians or the Elamites, the

Sumerians did not create a centralized state. Rather, many autonomous city-states developed, each controlling the fields, smaller towns, and villages surrounding it. As in later times, rivalry over land, canals, and other resources often must have led to warfare between these small states and to temporary conquest of one city-state by another. Kish held some preeminence among the competing states. According to the *Sumerian King List*, Kish was the first city on which “kingship was lowered from heaven” after the Flood (the event that seems to separate mythological events from legendary ones in Mesopotamian lore). Kish’s early dominance is also suggested by the fact that as early as the beginning of ED III, Mesopotamian rulers adopted the title “King of Kish” as a claim to supremacy over all of Sumer.

The earliest king known from actual inscriptions is Enmebaragesi, a ruler of Kish. According to the *King List*, he conquered Elam and had a reign of 900 years. Though the *King List* fancifully gives Enmebaragesi (En-men-barage-si in the translation shown in [Document 2.1](#)) an impossibly long reign, two Early Dynastic II inscriptions show that he was a real person. There also may be some truth in the claim by the Tummal Text, a later document describing reconstructions of a shrine in Nippur, that Enmebaragesi built Nippur’s first temple of Enlil. Though the temple of the goddess Inanna at Nippur goes back to the Uruk Period, there is no evidence for an Enlil Temple there before ED II.

Enmebaragesi’s son Agga (or Aka) was the last ruler of the First Dynasty of Kish according to the *King List*. A later epic poem described a conflict between this King Agga and Gilgamesh, King of Uruk. Gilgamesh, who was a semi-divine hero of several Sumerian epics, is also named in the *King List* where he is the fifth king of the First Dynasty of Uruk. However, because the *King List* claims that kingship over Sumer passed to Uruk only after the end of Kish’s First Dynasty, and because all of these early kings are given fantastically long reigns, it dates Gilgamesh more than a thousand years after Agga. Because Enmebaragesi was a real person, some scholars are convinced that Gilgamesh and Agga were real as well and that their respective dynasties overlapped considerably rather than being successive. Their historicity may be indicated by the Tummal Text, which makes Gilgamesh a younger contemporary of Mesanepada, a ruler of Ur known from seal impressions and dedicatory inscriptions. Mesanepada was the first king of the First Dynasty of Ur according to the *King List*. Unfortunately, even if Sumerologists find an inscription of the historical figure behind the Gilgamesh legends, they may not recognize it. Gilgamesh is possibly an epithet rather than a real name; it seems to mean “heroic ancestor” (Snell 1997: 18).

Besides Gilgamesh, the *King List* names at least two other divine beings as members of the First Dynasty of Uruk: Gilgamesh’s immediate predecessors, Dumuzi and Lugalbanda. In addition, Enmerkar (En-me-kar in Oppenheim’s

translation), predecessor of Lugalbanda as king of Uruk in the *King List*, became the hero of two later epics and a character in two others which center on the deeds of Lugalbanda. Thus, some historians refer to the ED II Period as Mesopotamia's "Heroic Age," an era whose rulers (real or imagined) later became larger than life and the subjects of myths, legends, and epic poems.

In the Early Dynastic III era (c. 2500–2330 BCE), longer and more numerous inscriptions allow historians finally to be able to recognize the historicity of many more Sumerian rulers and events. In one case, they even enable us to recount the history of a long-standing border dispute between Lagash and Umma. During the late ED II era, the two city-states had expanded their territories until there was only one small piece of open country left between them. Both cities, of course, laid claim to that land. Either because both Umma and Lagash were his vassals or simply because of his power and prestige, Mesilim of Kish arbitrated this dispute. He apparently decided that Umma should cultivate the field, but give a portion of its produce to Lagash. Umma seems to have resented this ruling, and a few generations later, it repudiated the agreement and stopped making its required payments. Naturally, this action precipitated war with Lagash. Eannatum, ruler of Lagash (c. 2430 BCE), defeated Umma (see [Figure 2.4](#)), reinstated the original agreement, and imposed an additional tax on the conquered city-state. He also claims to have driven out the Elamites who were occupying parts of Sumer and then subdued Elam itself, destroying Susa and several other Elamite cities.

Eannatum's successors, however, had difficulty maintaining the supremacy he had achieved. Umma continued to violate the original agreement and began diverting water from one of the irrigation channels used by both cities. Then, after another victory by Lagash, Umma revolted

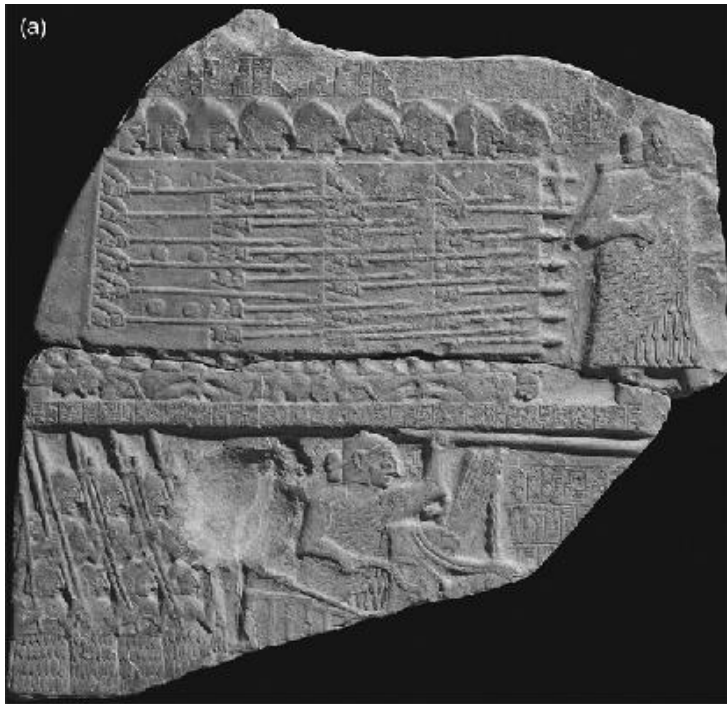


Figure 2.4 Victory Stele of Eannatum King of Lagash, c. 2430 BCE

Known as “The Stele of the Vultures,” this limestone slab depicts King Eannatum’s troops conquering Umma.

a. front; b. reverse.

a. akg/Bible Land Pictures; b. akg-images/De Agostini Picture Lib./G. Dagli Orti.

against Eannatum's grandson (or great grandson), killed him, and ended the dynasty. Umma now had the upper hand.

Lagash began experiencing internal turmoil that led a new ruler, Uruinimgina (or Uruka-gina as the name can also be read), to undertake extensive legal reforms. His proclamation contains the first recorded reference to "freedom," or "liberty," the Sumerian word *amargi* (literally, "return to the mother") (Kramer 1963: 79–83). Uruinimgina reduced taxes and sought to end the exploitation of the poor, orphans, and widows. He returned to the gods' temple lands seized by previous rulers, and prevented nobles and government officials from confiscating commoners' domestic animals and property. Others see his economic reorganization as a thinly veiled attempt to transfer private property into temple estates which he then controlled (Foster 1981). He also ended a custom in which officials had "shared" in the profits and wages of craftsmen, probably by collecting kickbacks or bribes. Though Uruinimgina ended these and other abuses that had occurred before he came to power, he was unable to restore Lagash's military power.

The reforming leader's rule ended when Lugalzagesi, ruler of Umma (c. 2340–2316 BCE), attacked and destroyed Lagash. Lugalzagesi also conquered several other Sumerian city-states, including Uruk, which he made his capital. He then tried to build an empire stretching into northern Mesopotamia and Syria. However, he was unable to realize his hopes for a lasting empire, for he was defeated and overthrown by Sargon, the upstart Semitic ruler of a new city called Akkad (or Agade). Sargon's rise marked the end of the Early Dynastic Period and the beginning of the first true Mesopotamian empire.

Debating the Evidence: The "Royal Tombs" of Ur

While excavating the remains of ancient Ur in the 1920s, Leonard Woolley uncovered sixteen elaborate tombs consisting of one to four chambers constructed entirely of stone or of stone and brick. They appear to date to the beginning of ED III, c. 2600 to 2500 BCE. Four inscriptions found in the tombs designated certain individuals as royalty—Meskalamdug and Akalamdug were given the title LUGAL ("king"), while Ninbanda and Puabi (formerly known as Shubad) were called NIN ("lady" or "queen"). However, these "kings" were not among those from Ur listed in the *Sumerian King List*. Nevertheless, Woolley interpreted the tombs as the burial places of Ur's early royalty.

The so-called Royal Tombs were quite different from the approximately 2,000 other burials excavated at Ur. A typical commoner's grave was about 4- to 12-feet deep and contained a single body either wrapped in reed mats or

lying in a coffin of wood, reeds, or clay. A few personal objects, such as jewelry, a knife, a pin, or a cylinder seal, were often placed with the body. Other offerings (usually weapons, tools, and vessels originally containing food and drink) were deposited elsewhere in the grave. In contrast to these simple graves, workers built the vaulted or dome-roofed chambers of the “Royal Tombs” at the bottoms of large pits about forty feet long, thirty feet wide and thirty feet deep, entered by sloping ramps. The principal occupants of these tombs were buried not only with many precious objects of gold, silver, bronze, lapis lazuli, shell, and inlaid wood, but also with the bodies of from three to seventy-four guards and attendants.

When Woolley excavated the tombs he noted that the bodies of the sacrificial victims showed no signs of violence and were usually arranged in orderly rows with small cups next to, or in the hands of, the corpses. It seems that the “king” or “queen” had been placed in a tomb’s main chamber with a collection of precious objects and often with two or more personal attendants positioned by the bier. Then the door to the chamber had been sealed. The other individuals stood in the corridor outside the main burial chamber, soldiers at attention, female attendants wearing fine garments and special gold, silver, and jeweled headdresses, and musicians playing harps and lyres. Chariots and/or wagons laden with precious offerings had been backed down the sloped ramp, the donkeys or oxen harnessed to them guided by grooms. In Woolley’s scenario, each person seems to have consumed a poisoned beverage and composed him- or herself to await death, though the musicians may have continued playing as long as possible before slumping over their instruments. Officials then killed the draft animals whose bodies often fell on top of those of their grooms. Finally, earth was shoveled over the roofed chambers, open areas of the pit, and the access ramp. More recent investigations on the royal burials, however, contradict Woolley’s picturesque burial account. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania Museum undertook CT scans of the skulls of two attendants from the royal graves, one female and one soldier (Baadsgaard et al. 2011). Both skulls show indications of perimortem blunt force trauma to the back of the head. The attendants were therefore brutally disposed of before taking their places in the macabre burial settings of the death pits.

Archaeologists have found no comparable burials, royal or otherwise, anywhere else in Mesopotamia, except possibly at Kish. There, in the 1920s and 1930s, excavators uncovered several early tombs each containing up to three wheeled vehicles and burial goods similar to those in Ur’s “Royal Tombs.” However, there are no indications that sacrificed attendants accompanied the burials at Kish.

Several scholars have agreed with Woolley that these sepulchers at Ur contain royal burials, probably belonging to a dynasty that ruled Ur just before

the start of the First Dynasty of Ur that is listed in the *Sumerian King List*.³ The slightly earlier god-kings of Egypt's First and Second Dynasties practiced human sacrifice in conjunction with their burials (see [Chapter 5](#)), so possibly the early rulers of Ur (and maybe also of Kish and other cities) chose to copy that custom. Some scholars see a reference to this practice in a badly preserved Sumerian epic, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, in which Gilgamesh possibly takes his attendants with him to the grave. However, the passage is too damaged to be sure about its meaning. Whatever the truth about this fragmentary epic, it is clear that several early city-state rulers named in the *Sumerian King List* were worshipped as gods in later times. Gilgamesh, for example, became an underworld deity. Perhaps, like the Egyptians, the Early Dynastic III Sumerians believed that their kings were divine or semi-divine beings who could magically enable their retainers to continue to serve them in the next world.

From the beginning, many scholars questioned Woolley's designation of the Ur sepulchers as "Royal Tombs." The fact that three-fourths of the tombs lack royal inscriptions is surprising. Even though all but two of the main chambers had been at least partially plundered in antiquity, the shafts and outer corridors were not disturbed and still contained many valuable objects. If these articles had once belonged to kings or queens, one would expect some of them to have inscriptions saying so. Moreover, most of the objects inscribed with names (usually cylinder seals) were not clearly linked with the principal burials in the tombs where they were found (Marchesi 2004). In fact, there were *two* inscriptions of Meskalamdug, one designating him as king and the other only as "Hero of the Good Land." Neither was with a main burial in a tomb chamber. The cylinder seal inscribed "King Meskalamdug" was found above a chamber containing a female occupant. The "hero" inscription was found in a grave containing precious objects of gold and **electrum** (an alloy of gold and silver) dug into the shaft of one of the largest tombs (PG 775). Thus, the inscribed objects might represent burial offerings given *by* the named individuals rather than being possessions of the people in the tombs.

The various unusual features of these burials at Ur have led some scholars to argue that they represent sacrifices of "substitute" kings and queens connected with Sacred Marriage fertility rites or possibly with propitiation rituals performed during times of crisis or disaster. However, as the Sacred Marriage ceremony took place every year, why are there only sixteen "royal" tombs? Also, why is the principal occupant of each tomb *either* a man or a woman rather than a couple, as we might expect? Moreover, there are no textual indications that the participants in the Sacred Marriage rites were killed. While the later Assyrians seem to have killed substitute kings as part of atonement rites at times of acute crisis, there is no proof that this practice goes back to

early Sumer. There is a possible instance of the substitute-king rite in Isin around 1860 BCE, after the collapse of the Sumerian Ur III empire (see [Chapter 3](#)). So, maybe these mass burials represent an extraordinary reaction to a series of extreme crises or natural disasters during the Early Dynastic era. Five later tombs at Ur from around 2200 to 2100 BCE also contained multiple interments of up to twenty bodies, all buried at the same time. So it is also possible that mass burials do not represent a general Sumerian practice, but rather an early custom peculiar to Ur, perhaps associated with individuals who had held some high rank in the cult of Nanna, Ur's patron god (Moorey 1977–78; Pollock 1991).

Today most scholars agree with Woolley that these were indeed “royal tombs” (Reade 2001; Marchesi 2004). Recent interpretations of the tombs in anthropological perspective all demonstrate the link between the phenomenon of the Royal Tombs and the rise of institutionalized kingship in the Early Dynastic III. Andrew Cohen proposes that the rituals of burial in Ur's Royal Tombs were a public spectacle that promulgated the notion that kings were nearly divine figures who could intercede on behalf of the common people and deserved adoration and offerings (Cohen 2005). In a slightly different vein, Bruce Dickson has argued that the phenomenon of human sacrifices in burials nearly always accompanies an unstable monarchy and is used to terrorize citizenry into submission. In his view, the nascent institution of kingship was weak and kings worked to legitimize their claims to power through rituals of cruelty (Dickson 2006).

Mesopotamian Culture during the Early Dynastic Era

Religion and Worldview

There seems to have been a common pantheon throughout most of Mesopotamia during the Early Dynastic Age. However, like the later Classical Greeks, Mesopotamians believed that each city-state had one of the major deities as its patron. Supposedly each divine patron had founded his or her city and continued to look after its interests. Thus, the patron god received the preponderance of a city's religious offerings and worship, usually at its largest temple. The Sumerian gods continued to be worshipped in later Mesopotamia, though the deities often were given Akkadian names and the identity of the

head of the pantheon changed as new cities or areas rose to prominence.

Mesopotamian deities were anthropomorphic, capable of exhibiting not only human virtues such as wisdom, courage, and loyalty, but also human faults such as anger, lust, and dishonesty. They were, of course, immortal, and had supernatural strength as well as control over the natural world. An (Anu in Akkadian), the patron-god of Uruk, was the god of the sky and originally the father and ruler of all the gods. Probably early in the Early Dynastic II Period, for unknown reasons, An's primary position in the pantheon was usurped by Enlil, patron of Nippur and god of the air. Though never attaining much political power, Nippur became a holy city for all Sumerians, and Enlil was thought to be not only king of the gods, but also the deity who chose and empowered all earthly rulers. In later times, Enlil was supplanted successively by Marduk, god of Babylon, and Ashur, the Assyrian national god. Close to An and Enlil in power was Eridu's patron deity, Enki (Ea in Akkadian), god of freshwater streams, springs, and lakes as well as the *abzu* (or *apsu*), the subterranean freshwater ocean on which the earth supposedly floated. Enki was also associated with wisdom, science, craftsmanship, and magic. Ur's deity, Nanna (Sin), the moon god who controlled time and human destiny, and Sippar's patron, Utu (Shamash), god of the sun and of justice, were also major male divinities. The principal female deities were Ninhursag, regarded as the mother of the gods, and Inanna (the Akkadian Ishtar), goddess of beauty, carnal love, and fertility.

Mesopotamians believed that humans had been created to serve the gods, so the building and repair of temples was one of the primary duties of rulers. Every day, priests and priest-esses clothed the divine cult statues housed within each city's temples and provided the gods with food in the form of burnt offerings and drink in the form of libations poured into the ground. Prayers, hymns, and dancing performed by temple musicians, singers, and other personnel accompanied these regular offerings and the rites for special events. During the more public rituals connected with holidays or festivals, the general population participated in the services, probably through processions, responses, chants, and singing. If people neglected their religious offerings or angered a deity in any way, disaster would ensue. But regular offerings to the temples, observing taboos and ritual requirements, and performance of the daily rites were supposed to keep the gods happy and willing to give good things to humanity. In addition, Mesopotamians held that the gods generally were pleased when humans led virtuous lives—obeying laws, telling the truth, showing compassion to the downtrodden, and performing charitable deeds. Nevertheless, the gods' motives and actions were not always understandable or predictable. If deities did become enraged, special atonement rites would hopefully soothe their anger and make them friendly once more. In later times,

some propitiation rituals probably included the appointment and slaying of a substitute king (and possibly also a queen), but it is not known whether that tradition goes back to the Sumerians.

The occasionally incomprehensible and capricious nature of the Mesopotamian gods may have been due in part to the difficult and undependable Mesopotamian environment. The levels of the Tigris and Euphrates, fed by rainfall and melting snow in the mountains of eastern Anatolia, were unpredictable. Sometimes the rivers were too low, making it impossible to irrigate all of the fields. At other times they were too high, resulting in disastrous floods that destroyed crops, settlements, and lives. Furthermore, Mesopotamia was always open to invasion by peoples from the mountains to the north and east or from the desert fringes on the west. Additionally, the rivalry and almost constant conflict between their city-states contributed to the early Mesopotamians' sense of instability and insecurity. Both nature and history taught Mesopotamians that the gods who controlled the world were not always beneficent or understandable. Early Dynastic and later Mesopotamians also came to affirm the existence of many demons that constantly tried to cause harm to human beings.

Because of these beliefs, ancient Mesopotamian thought is often characterized as pessimistic. Sumerians and their successors seem to have cultivated an attitude of acceptance and resignation. They prayed for prosperity and blessings, but were not unduly surprised if instead they experienced hardship and afflictions. Their fatalistic outlook was also displayed in their conception of the afterlife. If the "Royal Tombs" of Ur were for real kings and queens, then the Early Dynastic II Sumerians may have believed that their (divine?) rulers had some sort of glorious afterlife in which they would continue to be served by their courtiers and attendants. However, if this belief ever existed, by the end of the ED III Period, it had changed. Written sources indicate that Sumerians believed that the dead—rulers and commoners, rich and poor, good and bad alike—all went into a somewhat bleak underworld called "The Land of No Return." To reach this land, the spirits of the dead had to be ferried across a fearsome river by a boatman to whom they owed a payment. Family members buried their dead (sometimes in cemeteries and sometimes in graves beneath house floors) with offerings of food and drink to maintain them until they reached their destination. Families sometimes also included a few favorite objects that the dead person might use in the underworld. Some of the burial offerings were probably also intended to be used as payments to the boatman and various deities and demons.

Though there were contradictory ideas about what existence in the netherworld was like, it was generally agreed that no one wanted to go there. One dirge indicates that the sun goes through the underworld during

nighttime on earth and that the moon spends one day a month there. It also claims that Utu, the sun god, judged the dead and presumably, provided a better existence for the good than the bad. On the other hand, another work describes the misery and despair of a dead individual who knows he cannot return to the world of the living and is painfully aware of the sorrow and hardship his death has brought to his family and friends. Also, despite the claim that the sun illuminates the underworld each night, other texts leave the impression that it was mostly a gloomy place. The later *Epic of Gilgamesh* reflects this tradition when it describes the netherworld as a place of darkness whose inhabitants eat dust and clay.

Their fatalistic attitude does not mean that Sumerians were always despondent, though. They seem to have enjoyed playing games, for game boards and “toys” were among the offerings in the “Royal Tombs” of Ur. Moreover, Mesopotamian uncertainty and insecurity about the future led them to treasure each moment in this life. They seem to have developed strong bonds of friendship, but cherished even more their family relationships. According to a Sumerian proverb, “Friendship lasts a day; kinship endures forever” (Kramer 1963: 225). People were advised not to become too attached to things, for “possessions are sparrows in flight which can find no place to alight” (Kramer 1963: 225). Instead, family was a person’s true treasure: “The wife is a man’s future; the son is a man’s refuge; the daughter is a man’s salvation” (Kramer 1963: 226). (The final line of this proverb, “the daughter-in-law is a man’s demon,” indicates that conflicts between “in-laws” is not a recent phenomenon.) Mesopotamians especially loved and prized children, for they thought that descendants were a person’s only real immortality. Families usually had at least five or six children, but unfortunately, only about half of them survived to puberty.

Like other aspects of their religion and worldview, Sumerian creation stories and cosmology remained basic to later Mesopotamian thought. Several somewhat contradictory accounts, probably derived from the traditions of different city-states, described how this world and its gods came into being. In these stories, creation takes place in three distinct ways: through sexual intercourse between deities, through gods molding figures out of clay by hand, or through the power of the divine word. Most of the gods were thought to have been created through the first method (sex), though the myths sometimes differ about who begat whom or what. For example, what seems to be the oldest creation story stated that Nammu (the primeval ocean) by herself produced Enki (fresh water and the *abzu* on which the earth floats), An (heaven), and Ki (earth). An and Ki mated and begat Enlil (air) and all the earth’s vegetation before Enlil separated them. Other stories regard Enki as a son of An rather than of Nammu, and Enlil was not always regarded as a child

of An. Also, as we shall see, another myth credited growing things to the union between Dumuzi and Inanna rather than to An and Ki. Thus, Mesopotamians seem to have envisioned the sky (An) and earth (Ki) separated by air (Enlil). The earth, which included the underworld beneath it, was described as having four corners (like a rectangular field) and floating upon a body of fresh water called *abzu*. There were passages at the eastern and western ends of the world leading to the underworld. Through them the sun rose in the morning and set in the evening. Adjoining the western opening was a body of water called “the Infernal River” that the dead had to cross before descending into the underworld (Bottero 2001: 78). Outside of and presumably surrounding the universe was Nammu, the primeval ocean.

It was generally believed that human beings had been created in the image of the gods. They were molded out of clay (mixed with a god’s blood in some versions). The divine “potter” was a mother goddess in some accounts and Enki, god of fresh waters, in others. *Enki and the World Order*, the best-known story of creation by divine utterance, glorifies Enki’s unquestioned commands by which all aspects of the civilized world were organized and their fates decreed. Many of these Sumerian myths not only influenced later Mesopotamians, but through their Babylonian versions also became basic to the mythology of many other parts of the Near East.

The order and harmony of the created world, civilization, and human society were supposed to be preserved by divine properties, powers, or norms called *me* s. Every activity, office, institution, piece of equipment, and even each attitude and belief was thought to have its own perfect plan or design. A *me* seems to have been the set of rules or regulations that allowed the ideal model for each cosmic entity and cultural phenomenon to be implemented or realized in the world. The *mes* were thought to be held by An or Enlil, though on occasion, other deities could possess them. One story tells how Inanna tricked her father, Enki, into giving her these divine regulatory powers and succeeded in taking them from his city, Eridu, to her temple in Uruk.

A Sumerian myth that spread through the Near East and beyond is the account of the Deluge or Great Flood. Details in the surviving narrative indicate that it is the source of the later Mesopotamian accounts from which the biblical story of Noah’s Flood probably ultimately derives. Some scholars believe that this Sumerian story of a flood that covers the entire earth was inspired by a real (though smaller) flood that took place in prehistoric times. Leonard Woolley and other excavators in the 1920s and 1930s found flood deposits at several Mesopotamian cities that they thought represented a flood that had covered most of southern Mesopotamia, the Sumerians’ “world” (Woolley 1965: 27–36). Later study showed, however, that the various flood layers belonged to different times. They represented several *local* floods of

limited extent that had almost certainly not covered most of Mesopotamia (Bright 1942; Moorey 1982: 34–45).

A more recent theory suggests that a great flood that created the Black Sea around 5000 BCE might have given rise to various flood stories in the ancient world. The rising water level of the Mediterranean overtopped and broke through a natural dam blocking the Bosphorus Strait and flooded the valley and freshwater lake beyond, areas now at the bottom of the Black Sea (Ryan and Pitman 1999). While it is possible that some such single event lies behind the Deluge traditions, it is more likely that the early Mesopotamians developed their story from their experience of many smaller but nevertheless devastating local floods within Mesopotamia. Whatever the inspiration for the Mesopotamian story, it became the ultimate source for several later Near Eastern flood traditions, which in turn probably inspired the biblical story and various Greek flood accounts, including that of Deucalion's Flood (Finkel 2014).

Economy and Society

Two major institutions dominated the economy of early Sumer: the temple and the palace. Whereas the temple's dominance was clear already in the Uruk Period, the evolution of institutionalized kingship from Uruk to the Early Dynastic Period is murkier. *The Sumerian King List* suggests that dynastic kingship existed from the beginning of time, and as we have seen, some form of male rule probably goes back to the Uruk Period. Early Sumerian myths considered early kings such as Gilgamesh and Dumuzi as semi-divine figures; however, by the time of royal inscriptions in the ED II Period there is no indication of the concept of divine kingship. Early rulers (e.g., Eannatum of Lagash, Mebaragesi of Kish) designate themselves as *en* (lord), *ensi* (governor), or *lugal* (king, lit. great-man). Each means “ruler,” although whatever subtle differences in connotation may have existed elude us. What is clear is that by the end of the Early Dynastic Period c. 2300 BCE, male-led dynasties claimed kingship over nearly every city-state in Mesopotamia. These early kings were war leaders, major landholders, and divine intercessors. They lived in massive palaces and controlled major segments of the city's economy.

Sumer was organized into large self-sufficient estates or “households,” be they the temple, the palace, or private families (Pollock 1999). All of the produce from one section of each of these large estates was reserved for the landowner. These fields were worked by semi-free dependents that, in exchange for their labor, could farm small plots elsewhere on the estates to

support themselves and their families. Some of these “serfs” or their ancestors probably had been forced into their dependent status by royal or temple land seizures. Others likely had become part of this semi-free class through poverty, recent immigration into the city-state, or a chance misfortune. Kings and temples also set aside a portion of their estates for use by administrative personnel, artisans, and other workers as recompense for their labor. Thus, these two segments of the large estates were managed much like the medieval manors of western Europe. The remainder of temple and state holdings was rented out to tenants in exchange for a portion of the crop.

Free peasants, who made up about half of a city-state’s population, farmed small plots of land owned by their extended families. Such land was passed down in a family from generation to generation. It could be sold, but only with family approval by a family member designated by his kin. Often, other members of the family acted as witnesses to the transaction to indicate their consent. The main crops Mesopotamian farmers grew were barley and wheat, but they also had orchards of fruit trees that produced nuts, dates, pomegranates, lemons, mulberries, and other fruits.

Though most of a city’s economy was based on agriculture, animal husbandry was also important. Animals probably grazed along the edges of cultivated fields, on uncultivated land, and in fields left fallow for a season. Sheep and goats were the most common animals raised, though cattle, pigs, and ducks were also kept. These animals were most likely herded, fed, and cared for by children who were not yet old enough to engage in other farm labor. Many farmers also kept oxen and donkeys to pull plows and perform other necessary work in the fields. Even small farms also seem to have had small pools or ponds stocked with carp and other fish. The fish from these ponds, as well as milk, cheese, and duck eggs supplied most of the animal protein in the diet. Most people got to eat meat only on the rare occasions when they sacrificed an animal during a religious ceremony.

One major component of the economy already from the Uruk Period; was the production of wool and textiles. Large estates such as the temple or the palace retained hundreds of spinners, weavers, and related workers (mostly women) to produce textiles. Workers were given rations of barley, wool, and oil in exchange for their labor. Most were free, but many were “purchased,” including women and children.

Trade also played a significant role in the Sumerian economy. It is not clear, however, whether most artisans and merchants were independent agents working for themselves or retainers who worked only for the temples or kings. Certainly, some of them must have been attached to the divine and royal establishments, but many (if not most) of them were probably in business for themselves. During the ED III Period, Mesopotamians traded with areas along

the Persian Gulf and seem to have made contact with the fledgling civilization of the Indus valley. They also probably exchanged bitumen, agricultural products, and textiles for gold, silver, copper, lead, stone, timber, spices, and resins from Iran, Syria, and Asia Minor. They also may have obtained gold from Egypt. While most of this trade was done by barter, the long, slow transition to a “money” economy began to take place through the use of some precious metals, particularly silver, for payment.

Early Mesopotamian society consisted of four groups. We have already mentioned the first three: nobles, commoners (including free farmers, merchants, and artisans), and semi-free dependents. The fourth class was slaves. Slavery seems to have existed in Mesopotamia and Elam from at least the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr Periods when bound captives begin to be depicted on various objects. Most (though not all) slaves were prisoners of war, and ED III tablets indicate the foreign origin of many of them. Most of these foreign slaves probably came from conflicts with Elam or the tribes living in the Zagros Mountains. However, some slaves were fellow Mesopotamians captured during wars between city-states. Individuals could be enslaved for certain legal or religious offenses, and fathers could sell their children to pay off debts. However, children sold for debt became free again after three years. A slave could borrow money and buy his or her freedom, and if a slave married a free person, any resulting children were free. Generally only temples, palaces, and the rich owned slaves; slave-labor was not responsible for most of the work within Sumerian society.

There was also little or no market for hired labor in early Sumer, for those artisans or workers who were not attached to the palace or temple seem to have worked in family businesses or enterprises. When the government or religious establishment needed workers to erect walls or buildings, dig or deepen canals, or perform other tasks, they resorted to **corvée** labor. This term refers to temporary forced labor that citizens had to perform for the state. It was an obligation, like taxes, though it was paid with work rather than with goods or money. The Early Dynastic Mesopotamians subjected women and children, as well as men, to such forced labor.

From at least the Early Dynastic III Period onward, Mesopotamian society was patriarchal and only a male could become *en*, *ensi*, or *lugal*. In Lagash, it was even decreed that a woman who spoke disrespectfully to a man would have her mouth smashed with a baked brick. However, women did serve in the temples as priestesses and, as mentioned earlier, the wife of the city ruler seems to have had some administrative responsibilities and power. Sumerian had a dialect called *emesal*, “women’s language,” which was used for cultic and love poetry, and almost all Sumerian love poetry was written from the female perspective. Texts confirm the existence of at least one female physician and a

female scribe, so at least some women (probably from upper-class families) learned to read and write. Free women could legally make contracts, they could serve as witnesses in court, and they could buy and sell land. They were free to participate in commerce and they seem to have dominated some professions, such as weaving woolen cloth. It is likely, though, that most of the women in nonagricultural jobs (such as weaving) were family members working in family businesses directed by males.

Marriages were monogamous, though males who could afford it might also have had concubines in addition to a wife. Fathers usually arranged marriages for their children as business deals or alliances between families; the terms of a betrothal were normally spelled out in a contract. But cultic love songs suggest that occasionally, surreptitious premarital courtship and wooing (including sex) may have occurred. A proverb also indicates that some unions were entered into freely, for it counsels a young man to “marry a wife according to your choice” (Kramer 1963: 255). But if a marriage turned out badly, an unhappy wife had little recourse, while a husband could divorce his wife on relatively trivial grounds.

Education, Literature, and the Arts

Schools seem to have been developed along with writing in order to make the cuneiform system intelligible to others and to ensure its survival. Among the earliest logographic tablets were several consisting of lists of signs, which must have been intended for study and memorization by future scribes. Like writing itself, the earliest Mesopotamian schools were created for use by temple personnel. But as the administration of Sumerian towns became more secular, so too, did the educational system. By c. 2500 BCE, most major city-states must have had secularly managed schools for training the thousands of scribes and officials that we know existed at that time.

The Sumerian school, known as the *edubba* (“Tablet House”), taught not only reading and writing, but also all the knowledge and skills that leaders, officials, and bureaucrats needed for the religious and secular administration of the state. Later compositions from the third millennium BCE give us an idea of what school life was like, and it must have been similar in the fourth millennium BCE as well. Like the modern university, the scribal school became a center for the creation of new learning and culture while also preserving and disseminating the knowledge and traditions of the past. The head of a Sumerian school was called the equivalent of “professor” (or “expert”) and was also known as the “school father.” His faculty consisted of at least one assistant

professor (the “big brother”), instructors of various subjects such as drawing and Sumerian language and grammar, and individuals in charge of attendance and discipline. These teachers were paid salaries (though we do not know whether they came from public funds or privately paid tuition) and also occasionally received extra monetary gifts (or bribes) from their students’ parents. Students—the children of city officials, temple administrators, and other wealthy and influential individuals—were known as “school sons,” while alumni were called “school sons of past days.” These terms and other indications in the texts make it likely that only boys attended school. However, because documents mention at least one female scribe and a female physician, and because some queens and high priestesses headed temple administrations, at least some females likely were literate. Bright girls from highly placed families may have acquired an education from family members or private tutors.

Pupils attended school from sunrise to sunset. They learned primarily by copying and memorizing lists of words (arranged by categories such as names of trees and reeds, animals, cities, stones and minerals, etc.), tables of weights and measures, mathematical tables and problems, and Sumerian grammatical forms. When these basics had been mastered, they moved on to copying and studying literary works, various types of legal documents, and practical problems dealing with wages, surveying, and construction. Corporal punishment was meted out for most infractions. Students were beaten with a cane for making mistakes in their schoolwork or for producing a sloppy tablet and for misbehavior such as being late for school, wearing improper clothing, or speaking or standing without permission. Upon the completion of their education, the alumni became governmental officials, priests, military officers, sea captains, supervisors, foremen, accountants, public scribes, and other members of their city-state’s wealthy and powerful “professional” class.

Studying, copying, and redacting literary works was one of the primary tasks of senior students and teachers in the schools. The Sumerians probably first began to commit such literature to writing around 2500 BCE at the beginning of the Early Dynastic III Period. A few early mythological texts from around 2400 BCE have survived, but most examples of Sumerian literature come from copies made after 2000 BCE. However, linguistic features of these texts indicate that the bulk of them were composed much earlier, probably during the Early Dynastic Period. They include myths, hymns, lamentations, heroic legends or epics, proverbs, and historiographical texts. These Sumerian literary works formed the basis for the later Mesopotamian literature in the Akkadian language.

Some Sumerian literary works, such as hymns and lamentations, may have been used during worship in the temples, though most literature, including

“religious” works such as myths and even hymns, seems to have been composed in the schools. The vast majority of Sumerian literary compositions are in poetry, and it is likely that most of them (myths and epics as well as hymns and lamentations) were originally meant to be sung. A figure known as the *nar* (“minstrel”) is often mentioned in addition to the scribe, and such bards probably played an important role in the creation and popularization of both religious and secular compositions.

Among the secular literary works, pride of place belongs to the epic tales that were probably meant to be sung at royal courts during feasts or other celebrations. The nine surviving epics relate heroic stories about early semi-divine kings of Uruk—Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and most importantly, Gilgamesh, the protagonist of five of the poems. The Sumerian Gilgamesh stories (*Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish*; *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*; *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living*; *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World*; and *The Death of Gilgamesh*) established him as hero par excellence throughout Mesopotamia. They were later reworked into an Akkadian epic (see [Chapter 3](#)) that in turn spread his fame over the entire Near East.

We can only surmise about the music that accompanied Sumerian epics, hymns, and other songs. Leonard Woolley, excavator of Ur, poured plaster into hollow spaces while excavating the “Royal Tombs” and thus preserved the forms of several harps and lyres whose wooden parts had decayed. Some of these instruments have been reconstructed, and from them, musicologists can draw some conclusions about how harps and lyres were tuned and the note ranges available to the musicians who played them. The early Mesopotamians also used drums, tambourines, and reed or metal pipes to accompany their songs and dances.

Early Dynastic Mesopotamians proved themselves to be very skilled in other art forms as well. They produced some sculpture in the round, though such statues were usually fairly small (probably due to the lack of native sources of stone, wood, or metal). Despite the need to import all stone, sculptors created many votive “reverence statues” depicting individuals in prayer ([Figure 2.5](#)). These statues ranged in height from about ten inches to almost two and a half feet. Worshippers placed them before cult images in temples so that magically they could constantly venerate the deities. Sculptors also created excellent bas-relief carvings on stelae, bowls, vases, and plaques, and delicate drilled figures on cylinder seals that resulted in raised images when the seal was rolled over clay. Mesopotamian goldsmiths and jewelers were especially skillful, beating or pressing sheets of gold or electrum over wooden carvings to make ceremonial helmets or other objects. One of the most beautiful examples of their work is the so-called Ram in the Thicket from one of the “Royal Tombs” of Ur. This composite sculpture, actually one of a pair found in the tomb,

represents a he-goat (not a ram) tethered to the Tree of Life. The goat's head and legs and the tree were wood covered with thin sheets of gold secured by a thin layer of bitumen. The horns, ears, "beard," and hair around the shoulders were carved from lapis lazuli. The body was wood covered with a thick layer of bitumen that glued a plate of silver to the belly and many pieces of carved shell to the sides and back. Jewelers also made gold and lapis lazuli bulls' heads to adorn harps and lyres and created many beautiful and delicate necklaces, earrings, ceremonial headdresses, and other articles of personal adornment from gold, silver, lapis lazuli, carnelian, topaz, and other stones. Still other artisans decorated harps, lyres, and other wooden objects with patterns and scenes made of inlaid ivory, colored stone, shell, and lapis lazuli (see [Figure 2.6](#) in the following section).



Figure 2.5 Votive Statues from the Abu Temple of Tel Asmar (Eshnunna), c. 2600 BCE

Baghdad Museum and Oriental Institute Chicago. © Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago.

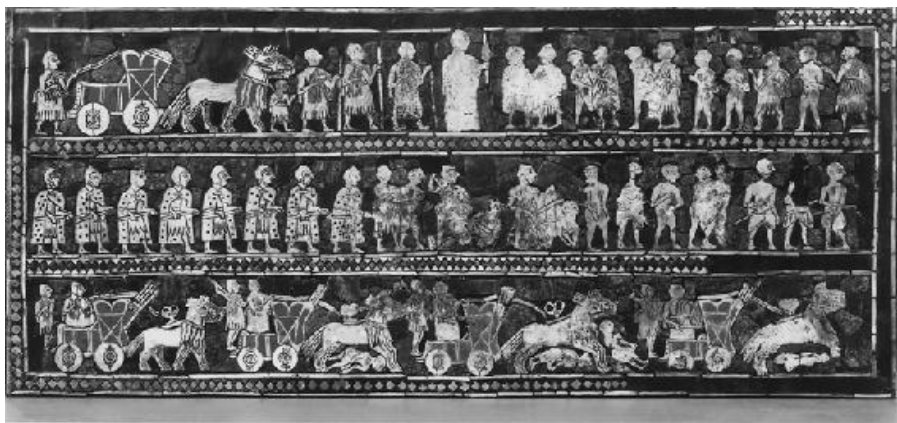


Figure 2.6 Four-Wheeled Chariots and Infantry Attack an Enemy, c. 2600–2500 BCE

This well-preserved example of inlay technique is from the “Standard of Ur” found in the “Royal Tombs” at Ur. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Science, Technology, and Warfare

As in almost all other fields of endeavor, later Mesopotamian advances in science and technology grew from Early Dynastic roots. The Sumerians developed a mathematical system based on 60 (the sexagesimal system), but which used the factor 10 as well. Because of this system, Mesopotamians tended to order things in units of 6, 12, or 60, or in numbers evenly divisible by 60. Thus, they divided circles into 360 degrees, each of which could be broken into 60 minutes. The day, which began at sunset, was partitioned into 12 “double hours” of 60 “double minutes” each. We still use these divisions of circles and time. (Mesopotamians usually measured the divisions of time by water clocks—cylindrical or prism-shaped vessels from which water dripped at a steady rate.)

The flexibility of the sexagesimal system of numeration and the positional notation system developed to write it allowed later Mesopotamian mathematicians to create tabulations of reciprocals, squares, square roots, cubes, cube roots, and the sums of squares and cubes. These tables were used to help solve various types of equations and calculations of area and volume.

Belief that the sun, moon, and stars were gods and that what happened in the observable skies influenced what happened on earth led the Mesopotamians to study the heavens. Their careful observations gradually led to the development of astronomical texts listing movements of various heavenly bodies, then to relatively accurate predictions of lunar and solar eclipses, and ultimately, to the creation of the astrological zodiac. Though these

developments came later (in the case of the zodiac, much later) than the Early Dynastic Period, early Mesopotamians had already learned enough to realize that their calendar of twelve lunar months of twenty-nine or thirty days each was about eleven days short of the solar year. So every so often, when the two got far enough out of kilter, scholars advised the ruler to add an extra month or two to the official year to bring it back in line with the solar year. In later times, Mesopotamian astronomers would develop a formula for adding intercalary months that would allow the lunar and solar calendars to be kept in agreement automatically.

Mesopotamian medicine, like astronomy, included a mixture of religious and scientific elements. Mesopotamians believed that illness was caused by demons or black magic or was sent by the gods as punishment for some sin of omission or commission. Therefore, the primary way to cure a disease was to have a *baru* priest (diviner) identify the responsible supernatural agent. Then, an *ashipu* priest (exorcist) would remove it through magical rites and incantations if it proved to be demonic, or placate it through prayers and sacrifices, if divine. On the other hand, without denying the efficacy of magic, the *asu* (physician) took a more rational and empirical approach to medicine. As early as the latter part of the Early Dynastic Period, such physicians compiled lists of prescriptions describing the necessary ingredients and procedures for making various salves and poultices to be applied externally and medications to be taken internally. Experience seems to have shown that these prescriptions were effective against certain ailments.

Early Mesopotamia's technology, the application of knowledge to practical purposes, was also impressive. Two areas of Mesopotamian achievement have already been mentioned, metallurgy and irrigation. Around 3000 BCE, Near Eastern metalsmiths had discovered that mixing small amounts of tin, arsenic, or other metals with copper made the final product much harder. The new alloy, bronze, could be poured into open or closed molds for casting tools, weapons, sculpture, or jewelry, or hammered into sheets and then shaped. We do not know where in the Near East this discovery was first made, but it quickly spread throughout the region.⁴ Bronze use became so widespread that archaeologists generally use the term "Bronze Age" to designate the period following c. 3000 BCE in the Near East. Mesopotamia was no exception. Throughout the third millennium, its people were in the forefront in using and improving the techniques for producing and working bronze and other metals.

Mesopotamian irrigation and agricultural technology also advanced during the third millennium BCE. As city-states grew larger and increased in number, a much more complex system of canals, levees, dams, weirs, and reservoirs became necessary. Mesopotamian engineers developed the extensive knowledge and skills needed for planning, mapping, surveying, constructing,

and leveling these essential irrigation works. Technology was also applied to the improvement of agriculture. Some plows were equipped with bronze-covered points, called “the tongue of the plow,” enabling them to cut more deeply into the ground. Another type of plow (used after the ground had been tilled, pulverized, and raked) had a funnel just behind the blade that automatically deposited seeds into the new furrows. Farmers learned to plant a belt of date palms or other trees along the edges of their gardens. These trees protected the more delicate lettuce, turnips, chickpeas, lentils, onions, garlic, and other vegetables from being scorched by the sun or dried out by the wind. Mesopotamian agriculturalists also developed systematic methods for producing abundant yields of grain. Teachers compiled these procedures into a farm manual or “farmer’s almanac” from which their pupils could learn how to manage large estates successfully.

Among the many other early Mesopotamian technological accomplishments are creation of the earliest-known true arches, barrel-vaults, and domes. They produced and dyed large amounts of woolen cloth, using spindles to spin the wool, horizontal and vertical looms to weave it into cloth, and alkaline solutions and foot stomping to make it thicker and more compact. They also produced textiles from flax and linen. Finally, they supplemented human and animal transport with sledges, two- and four-wheeled wagons, boats, and ships. The wheel, in particular, seems to have been a Mesopotamian invention, appearing for the first time in the Early Dynastic Period.

Most of these technological advances made life easier or better. However, some technology received military applications that made warfare more efficient and more deadly. Bronze axes, daggers, swords, spearheads, javelins, and arrowheads were more lethal than the copper or stone weapons that preceded them. The Mesopotamians also seem to have been the first to develop and use the composite bow made of wood strengthened by bands of sinew and/or horn. Such bows were difficult to make, but they were much stronger and more accurate than regular bows. Early Dynastic infantrymen not only used such weapons, but they also were protected by leather or bronze helmets and large bronze-studded rectangular shields that covered their bodies from neck to ankle (see [Figure 2.4](#)). Soldiers are also shown wearing capes that appear to be studded with metal disks (see [Figure 2.6](#)). They attacked in a phalanx formation—rows of men marching in straight lines, shields in front, and spears protruding between the shields (see [Figure 2.4](#)).

In addition to the infantry, early Mesopotamian armies could assault the enemy with two or four-wheeled chariots, each pulled by four donkeys. The wheels on these chariots were made of two solid wooden semicircles or three boards held together by struts nailed across them. They had metal rims, sometimes with studs to provide traction. The two-wheeled chariots carried

only one warrior, but the larger four-wheeled vehicles had room for a driver and a warrior (see [Figure 2.6](#)). The larger chariots were also equipped with a quiver of javelins. Because they did not have strong, fast animals to pull them, even the two-wheeled chariots were relatively slow, cumbersome, and probably difficult to steer. Nevertheless, they were faster than a man on foot and helped to give Mesopotamian armies a decided advantage in battle against outsiders.

Notes

1. It should be noted that throughout this work the words “Semitic” and “Semite” (as well as “Indo-European,” “Indo-Iranian,” or “Aryan”) are linguistic terms, not racial or ethnic ones.
2. For example, Piotr Michalowski (1983) argues that the Sumerian King List is an ideological document used to prop up the Isin kings of the second millennium BCE.
3. Woolley found an inscription of Mesanepada, first king of Ur’s First Dynasty according to the *King List*, in debris above the “Royal Tombs.” If the stratigraphy of these deposits was interpreted correctly, it would seem to contradict a suggestion drawn from the Tummal Text that Mesanepada was a contemporary of Enmebaragesi and an older contemporary of Gilgamesh. Enmebaragesi clearly belongs to the mid-ED II Period. Samuel N. Kramer (1963: 50) questions the stratigraphic evidence and maintains the possibility that the First Dynasty of Ur was *earlier* than the “Royal Tombs.” Julian Reade however, shows that the earlier tombs are not in the *King List*, while Mesanepada of the First Dynasty of Ur and his successors make up the latest series of burials (2001: 24).
4. Early smelting sites in the Taurus and Zagros Mountains are the most likely candidates.

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The First Mesopotamian Empires

Egypt was unified into a centralized state around 3000 BCE (see [Chapter 5](#)), but Mesopotamia remained divided into many competing city-states until the latter part of the third millennium BCE. Then, two empires arose in southern Mesopotamia in relatively rapid succession; the empire of Sargon of Akkad and that of the Third Dynasty of Ur. These early Mesopotamian centralized states had a huge influence on several other areas of the Near East and laid the military, political, economic, and ideological foundations for later Mesopotamian empires.

The Akkadian Empire (c. 2334–2193 BCE)

Sargon of Akkad (c. 2334–2279 BCE)

A new era for Mesopotamia began with the victories of an Akkadian-speaking king whose birth name is unknown. We know him as Sargon, but he almost certainly was not originally called “the legitimate (or true) king,” which is what Sargon (*Sharrum-kên* in Old Akkadian) means. He probably was a commoner who seized the throne, but we know little about his origins or rise to power, even though they became the subject of later folk stories and legends. According to one late account, Sargon’s mother was an *entu*-priestess (a high cultic functionary, probably a high priestess). He did not know his father (see [Document 3.1](#)). This passage has often been interpreted as insinuating that Sargon was illegitimate. However, its purpose may have been to establish his noble birth, because only a woman from a highly placed family would have been made an *entu*-priestess. Other traditions from the early part of the second millennium BCE may be closer to the truth. They indicate that Sargon’s father was a date grower and they make no claim that his mother was a highborn priestess. There is probably some validity also in the claim that Sargon rose to

the position of cupbearer (**vizier**) of Urzababa, King of Kish, but revolted against his master and became king in his place. However, the *Sumerian King List* names five people who supposedly ruled Kish after Urzababa. It's likely though, that those last five members of Urzababa's dynasty were only vassal rulers under either Lugalzagesi of Umma or Sargon. All that is fairly certain is that Urzababa, Lugalzagesi, and Sargon were contemporaries (see [Table 3.1](#)).

Document 3.1 The Birth Legend of Sargon

The earliest text of this legend about the birth and upbringing of Sargon of Akkad was found on an eighth-century Assyrian tablet. It employs the popular folkloric theme of the hero who assumes his proper role of leadership only after being abandoned in a floating basket, saved, and raised by a stranger. Similar stories are told about Moses, Romulus and Remus, and Krishna. Sargon, who lived in the third millennium BCE, had an enduring impact on the imagination of Babylonians for over a thousand years. The translation is by Benjamin R. Foster (1993: Vol. 2, 819). The words in square brackets have been added by W. Stiebing.

I am Sargon the great king, king of Agade [Akkade or Akkad].
My mother was a high priestess, I did not know my father.
My father's brothers dwell in the uplands.
My city is Azupiranu, which lies on Euphrates bank.
My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, she bore me in secret.
She placed me in a reed basket, she sealed my hatch with pitch.
She left me to the river, whence I could not come up.
The river carried me off, it brought me to Aqqi, drawer of water.
Aqqi, drawer of water, brought me up as he dipped his bucket.
Aqqi, drawer of water, raised me as his adopted son.
Aqqi, drawer of water, set (me) to his orchard work.
During my orchard work, Ishtar loved me,
Fifty-five years I ruled as king.

Table 3.1 Chronology of the Akkadian Penod and the Third Dynasty of Ur

AKKAD	LAGASH	URUK	UR
Sargon (c. 2334–2279)		Lugalzagesi (c. 2340–2316)	
Rimush (c. 2278–2270)			
Manishtushu (c. 2269–2255)			
Naram-Sin (c.			

2254–2218)		
Shar-kali-sharri (c. 2217–2193)		
Igigi/Nanum/Imi/Elulu Anarchy;		
Destruction by the Gutians		
Dudu (c. 2189–2169)		
Shu-turul (c. 2168–2154)	Ur-Baba (c. 2155–2142)	
Gutian rule	Gudea (c. 2141–2122)	Utuhegal (c. 2123–2113)
	4 Rulers (c. 2121–2111)	
		Ur-Nammu (c. 2112–2095)
		Shulgi (c. 2094–2047)
		Amar-Sin (c. 2046–2038)
		Shu-Sin (c. 2037–2029)
		Ibbi-Sin (c. 2028–2004)

Note: All dates are BCE.

Surviving inscriptions from this time (or Old Babylonian copies of them) show that Lugalzagesi claimed hegemony over all of Mesopotamia, that Sargon defeated Lugalzagesi, and that Sargon had to restore Kish and return it to its population. So, it is likely that Lugalzagesi gained control of Kish for a time and destroyed or damaged the city in the process. It is not known, though, whether during Lugalzagesi’s ascendancy Sargon was master of Kish and/or already ruling Akkad. All we know is that Lugalzagesi was the major power in Mesopotamia. He ruled Uruk as well as Umma, Lagash, Ur, and fifty other towns. Sargon opposed and defeated Lugalzagesi, captured him, and marched him in a yoke, or neck-stock, to Nippur where he presented him as a trophy to Enlil. Sargon then conquered Ur, Lagash, Umma, and the rest of southern Mesopotamia, and “washed his weapons in the sea” (the Persian Gulf). He “restored” Kish and claimed hegemony over Sumer (see Oppenheim 1955;

Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 1, 49). Was it at this point that he founded his capital city of Akkad (or, more accurately, Akkade, sometimes written as Agade in Sumerian)? Or had he built this city earlier, before his struggle with Lugalzagesi? Unfortunately, neither the surviving inscriptions nor the later legends indicate exactly when Akkad was established. Even its location is unknown, though it probably was in the neighborhood of Kish and Babylon. In this way, Sargon shifted power from southern Mesopotamia to the north.

Sargon consolidated his dominion over Sumer by replacing most of the rulers who had opposed him with governors who were citizens of Akkad and probably Akkadian-speakers like himself. In some places he retained the local kings as *ensi*, or governor. He also demolished the walls of all the southern cities to prevent rebellions. Furthermore, he installed his daughter Enheduanna as *entu*-priestess of the moon god Nanna in Ur and of An, the god of heaven, at Uruk. Enheduanna took her religious responsibilities seriously and maintained the Sumerian traditions. In fact, she was later credited with composing a beautiful Sumerian hymn to Inanna and producing a collection of temple hymns. Her conscientious dedication to her religious roles may have reconciled some people to her father's rule, while her almost constant presence in either Ur or Uruk undoubtedly forced any disgruntled citizens of those cities to think twice before plotting revolt. The local priests and leaders of Ur, however, seem to have regarded her appointment as an affront. Sometime after Sargon's death they drove her out of the city, only to see her reinstated under her brother's rule. The chronology for Sargon's campaigns and conquests is not clear. But, it was probably after placing Sumer under his control that Sargon undertook a campaign in Elam. He defeated a coalition army led by the King of Awan and forced the rulers and governors of the area to become his vassals. Moreover, though Sargon selected an Elamite to govern the province, texts from Susa show that Akkadian became the language of the bureaucracy there. However, the ruler of Susa (and probably other "vassal" rulers of outlying areas) retained a large amount of local autonomy.

Sargon also led his army up the Euphrates River, conquering several cities, including the important states of Mari and Ebla. He continued his march northwestward as far as "the Cedar Forest and the Silver Mountain" (probably the Amanus and Taurus ranges) and possibly advanced deeper into Anatolia as later legends claim. However, he probably did not establish permanent control over the areas west of Ebla, nor is it likely that he sailed to Cyprus and Kaptara (Crete), or conquered the coastal areas of the entire Persian Gulf as later stories and **omens** declare. Nevertheless, Sargon secured the trade routes along the upper Euphrates River down which timber, silver, and other metals could move freely into southern Mesopotamia. During his reign, merchant ships from Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha, cultures of the Persian Gulf and beyond, also

unloaded their cargo at Akkad's docks.

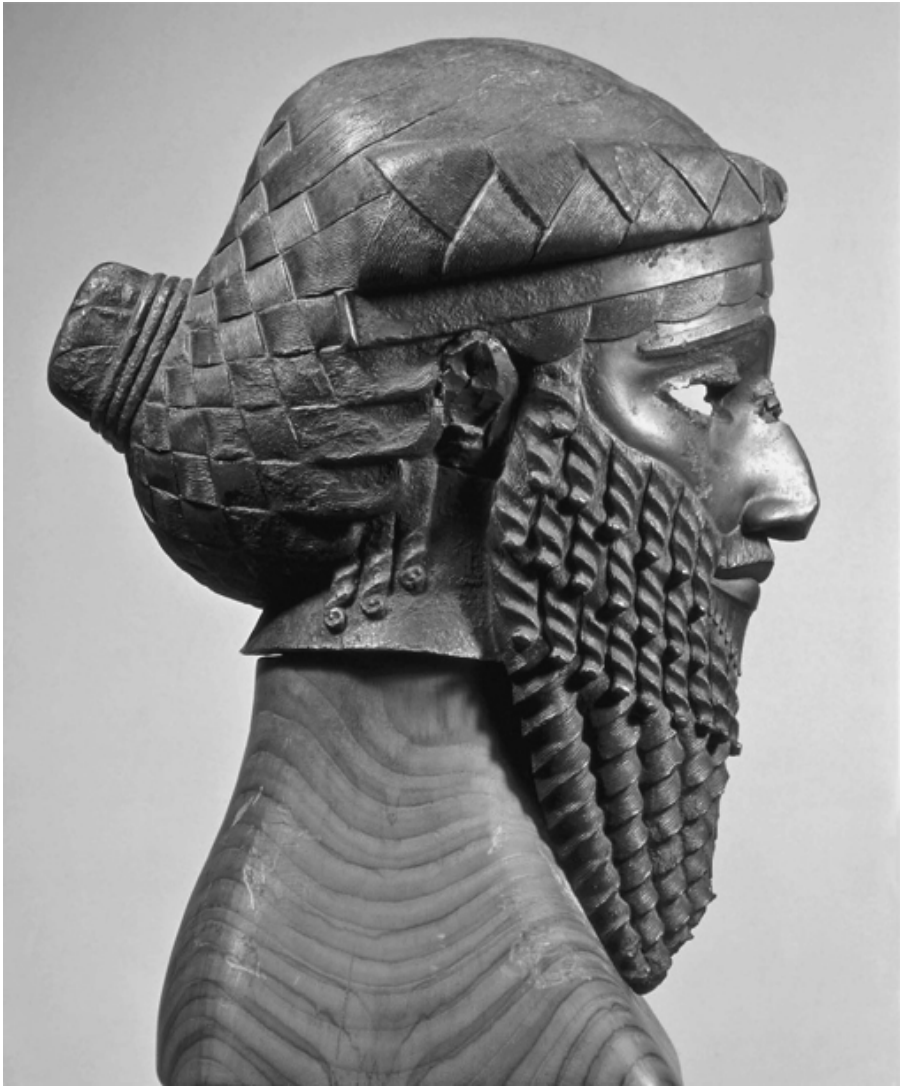


Figure 3.1 Bronze Head of an Akkadian King

This head possibly represents Sargon of Akkad, but is more likely an image of Manishtushu or Naram-Sin. The naturalistic style and the fine workmanship are characteristic of the new Akkadian style in art. The inlaid eyes were gouged out in antiquity.

Iraq Museum, Baghdad. © Hirmer Photoarchiv, Munich, Germany.

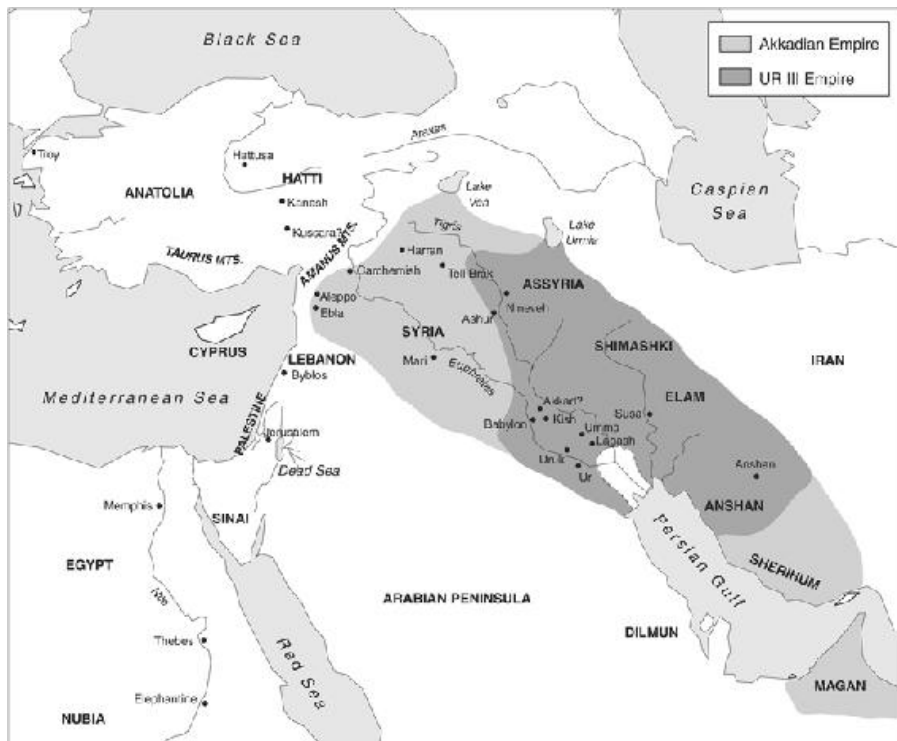
Many historians have assumed that Sargon also conquered northeastern Mesopotamia, and a magnificent bronze head of an Akkadian ruler found at Nineveh has often been thought to depict Sargon ([Figure 3.1](#)). However, none of Sargon's surviving inscriptions mentions campaigns in this area, and

archaeologists have found no direct evidence of his rule at Nineveh or Ashur. It's probable that the Assyrian region was not added to the empire until the time of Sargon's son Manishtushu, so it is likely that either he or Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin, is the king portrayed by the Nineveh bronze.

A late chronicle claims that near the end of Sargon's reign, many areas of his empire revolted against him. Considering the long history of independent city-states in Mesopotamia, such a revolt against a king who was elderly and possibly thought to be getting feeble is not unlikely. However, the old king seems to have been still vigorous enough to defeat the rebels and maintain control over his empire until his death (c. 2279 BCE). He set the standard for later Mesopotamian rulers and certainly deserved the name history has bestowed upon him, Sargon the Great. He is the first Mesopotamian ruler to employ the title of *šar kiššati*, "king of the world," a commonplace for Mesopotamian kings thereafter.

Sargon's Successors

Sargon was succeeded by his son Rimush (c. 2278–2270 BCE) who had to face new rebellions throughout Mesopotamia and Elam. Nevertheless, he suppressed the revolts and preserved the empire until he was assassinated by some of his own courtiers. His brother Manishtushu (who may have instigated the palace conspiracy responsible for Rimush's death) then became king (see [Table 3.1](#)). Manishtushu (c. 2269–2255 BCE) probably added Assyria as well as Anshan and Sherihum (areas southeast of Susa) to the Akkadian Empire (see [Map 3.1](#)). According to a damaged inscription, he also seems to have taken a fleet down the Persian Gulf where he defeated a coalition of thirty-two kings and gained control over their country at the southern end of the Gulf and beyond, "up to the silver mines" (probably in what is now the United Arab Emirates and Oman). Despite these successes, problems persisted within the inner circles of the administration, and like his brother, Manishtushu probably was murdered in a palace conspiracy.



Map 3.1 The Akkadian Empire at Its Greatest Extent (under Naram-Sin) and the Empire of the Third Dynasty of Ur

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Manishtushu's son, Naram-Sin ("Beloved of Sin"), then ascended to the throne (see [Table 3.1](#)). He had a long and glorious reign (c. 2254–2218 BCE) that, like that of his grandfather Sargon, would inspire many later folk tales and legends. When he became king, though, he faced many problems. Ebla had become independent again sometime after Sargon's northwestern campaign, and a people known as the Hurrians had begun occupying the mountain regions of southern Anatolia and northern Syria. (This population movement will be mentioned again later in this chapter and discussed more fully in [Chapter 4](#).) The fierce Lullubi and Gutian peoples in the northern Zagros Mountains were also unfriendly. Thus, the trade routes through northern Syria to the Taurus Mountains and through the Zagros Mountains to northern Iran and Afghanistan were no longer safe. Inability to obtain silver, bronze, lapis lazuli, and other products from the northwest and northeast had likely been a major reason for Manishtushu's campaign down the Persian Gulf to the region of Magan (the United Arab Emirates and Oman), an area rich in metals and beautiful black diorite stone. So, Naram-Sin retraced his grandfather's march to the "Cedar Mountain," in the process recapturing Mari, destroying Ebla, and

conquering Arman (probably Aleppo). He also campaigned against the Hurrians, marching into eastern Turkey where he erected a **stele** with an image of himself near modern Diyarbakir. At Tell Brak on the Habur River, he constructed a fortress and left a garrison to guard the major roads connecting northern Mesopotamia with Anatolia and northern Syria, and arranged a diplomatic marriage between his daughter and the Hurrian state of Urkesh. He then led punishing attacks on the Lullubi, celebrating his victory over them by erecting a sandstone stele that centuries later was carried off to Susa (see [Figure 3.2](#)). Finally, when the ruler of Magan revolted, Naram-Sin rushed southward and captured the rebellious king. Even more serious was a massive revolt by two separate coalitions of southern Babylonian cities, though he successfully crushed that as well. His extensive victories led him to adopt a more grandiose title than those used previously—"King of the Four Quarters," that is, ruler of the entire world to its outer limits.

At some point during his reign, Naram-Sin proclaimed himself a god. His inscriptions began writing his name with the determinative sign used to indicate the names of deities, and the seals of his courtiers proclaim him "the god of Akkad." The stele he erected to celebrate his victory over the Lullubi shows Naram-Sin wearing a horned helmet, a symbol of divinity in Mesopotamia (see [Figure 3.2](#)). However, because his helmet has only one set of horns, he is claiming to be only a minor god. Major deities wore helmets with four sets of horns. Another new feature of this stele is the size of the king in relation to the other figures. In earlier carvings, kings were rendered on the same scale as their subjects or only slightly larger (see [Figures 2.2, 2.4, and 2.6](#) in [Chapter 2](#)), while gods were depicted much larger than the humans who served them. On Naram-Sin's stele, *he* is the major divine figure, towering over the defeated enemy and his own soldiers alike. The other gods have not been depicted in human form so that the size of Naram-Sin relative to that of the traditional gods is not an issue. The heavenly gods are shown only as two modest-sized stars shining down upon the king and observing his great victory.

The reason for Naram-Sin's establishment of divine kingship in Mesopotamia is not known. His action almost certainly went against long-standing tradition. Early Dynastic III Sumerian rulers considered themselves only their city-gods' chosen stewards or viceroys, and not even the great Sargon had elevated himself to the rank of a god. An inscription on a bronze statue found in northern Mesopotamia credits Naram-Sin's divinity to the citizens of Akkad. It states that because of Naram-Sin's victories, the people begged the major gods to make him "the god of their city Agade [Akkad] and they built him a temple in the midst of Agade" (Kuhrt 1995: 51). Maybe by becoming Akkad's city god, Naram-Sin was making a claim to all of its

possessions, especially its land, because traditionally a city was believed to belong to its divine patron (Nissen 1988: 172–173). Perhaps he was trying to provide a common religious focus to unify the various parts of his empire and guarantee the obedience



Figure 3.2 The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin

Originally set up in the temple at Sippar, this stele was taken as booty to Elam and excavated at Susa. Akkadian art focused on battles and heroism. Notice how the size and helmet of the muscular figure of Naram-Sin emphasize his affinity to the deities.

Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais /Art Resource, New York.

of his subjects (Oates 1986: 41). However, the institution of divine kingship did not bring unity to the Akkadian Empire, nor did it prevent revolts. Moreover, although the remaining Akkadian kings and most of the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur would claim divinity, the Mesopotamian people did not generally accept the concept. Later, most Mesopotamian rulers reverted to the idea that the king was only a human agent of the gods, not a minor divinity in human form.

After his death, Naram-Sin's son, Shar-kali-sharri, assumed the throne for the next twenty-five years. We know he campaigned against Amorites in the north and Elamites in the south, but have little other information regarding his reign. It was either during his reign or slightly thereafter, that the Akkadian Empire collapsed (see "Debating the Evidence"). Under the last kings, Dudu and Shu-durul, the Akkadian state consisted of little more than the region around Akkad itself.

Administration of the Empire

Sargon and his successors were the first Mesopotamians to draw together a large swath of land encompassing different peoples and formerly independent states. New institutions were therefore instituted to govern such an extensive area. One of the precedents established by Sargon was the appointment of Akkadians to governorships throughout his conquered territories, thereby consolidating Akkadian control. The second was the placement of his daughter as *entu*-priestess of the moon god at Ur. Enheduanna held this position through her father's reign and those of her brothers. Naram-Sin established his daughter Enmenanna in the post, and in later post-Akkadian times, it was regarded as a sinecure for the ruler's daughter. Another daughter of Naram-Sin became high priestess of Enlil at Nippur, a third was a priest-ess of the sun god at Sippar, and a granddaughter was a lamentation-singer of the moon god. Sargon's successors in the Akkadian Dynasty also followed his lead in appointing Akkadian-speaking family members and supporters as high priests, governors, or military commanders throughout the empire.

Probably the longest lasting and most significant change Sargon and his descendants introduced was the use of Akkadian as the official language of government and commerce. The Sumerian cuneiform script was adapted,

possibly for the first time, to write Sargon's Semitic tongue. Scribes continued to use a mixture of logograms and syllabograms (phonetic signs) as before, but they often added phonetic signs behind logograms to indicate inflected endings or other grammatical features. These signs show that the logograms were being read as Akkadian words, not Sumerian ones. Also, by the time of Naram-Sin, scribes were using fewer logograms, instead preferring to write Akkadian words with phonetic signs. Not only the language, but also the clay tablets themselves changed. They became more rectangular and somewhat flatter than their Early Dynastic predecessors. Moreover, the tablets have a much more attractive appearance than in earlier times, for the signs are beautifully formed and placed carefully within ruled lines. The standardization of language and script helped streamline the bureaucratic needs of the government.

The Sumerian language continued to be used, especially for religious hymns and ceremonies, and scribes continued to study it. However, outside of the extreme southern portion of Mesopotamia, the numbers of Sumerian speakers were already declining. On the other hand, the use of Akkadian for governmental decrees and trade during the Akkadian Empire and the presence of Akkadian-speaking governors throughout the realm resulted in Akkadian becoming the common spoken language throughout most of Mesopotamia and beyond. The aristocracy in Elam also commonly used Akkadian; even the Lullubi in the Zagros and the Hurrians in northern Mesopotamia and southeastern Anatolia began producing inscriptions in Akkadian.

Another innovation of the Akkadian Dynasty was the creation of a common system for dating events throughout the empire. Before this time, individual city-states had dated their records by the regnal years of city-rulers. The unification of Mesopotamia required that a single chronology be used. To this end, Sargon began naming each year after a significant event of the previous year. This system continued to be used by the Third Dynasty of Ur and Hammurabi's dynasty in Babylon.

Sargon and his successors enlarged their imperial armies by recruiting contingents from the tribes in the mountains or the desert fringes of Mesopotamia and by forcing the conquered cities to contribute men. The rulers also had dependents who owed them military service. An inscription mentions that 5,400 of these personal retainers ate daily in Sargon's presence. To provide estates for these and other supporters and to supply rations for the army, the Akkadian kings greatly increased the amount of land belonging to the crown. They acquired some of this land through their military campaigns, but much of it was purchased from the owners. And, because fields usually belonged to families rather than to individuals, land sales normally involved many people. The king paid all those who had any claim to the land and, as custom required, he distributed presents to these individuals at banquets that he provided.

However, the price paid to the sellers, although based on computations of the amount of grain the land would yield, was usually little more than the value of one year's crop. Probably most of the sellers were impoverished farmers who had suffered reverses or lost many family members during the wars. They most likely were desperate, willing to take any offer. On the other hand, it's also possible that some, if not many, felt threatened by the king and were too frightened to resist. Like Mario Puzo's fictional "Godfather," the king may have made them "an offer they couldn't refuse." It should be noted, though, that the king usually provided maintenance (probably as soldiers or tenant farmers on the royal estates) for those displaced by his land acquisitions.

Land, of course, was not the only asset that Akkadian kings acquired. In addition to tribute and taxes from conquered states, the rulers of Akkad were enriched by their monopoly over foreign trade. Military campaigns were undertaken to open and secure trade routes. The roads and river routes from Asia Minor and Iran and the seaways from Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha (see [Chapter 4](#)) carried precious materials that the Akkadian kings disbursed as lavish gifts to temples, important officials, and dependents. Moreover, state slaves provided the kings with additional wealth for redistribution. Tens of thousands of Mesopotamians and neighboring peoples must have been killed in battles during the Akkadian Period, but many thousands more were captured and enslaved. These slaves were themselves a form of wealth the king could give to supporters or temple establishments. Most, however, were retained by the state and put to work in quarries or mines extracting stone or ores to be used for stelae and statues to glorify the king or to make products for later redistribution. The ruler's ability to create and dispose of these various forms of wealth obviously increased his power and enlarged his already paramount status.

Debating the Evidence: Explaining the Empire's Collapse

Later accounts such as *The Curse of Akkad* and *The Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin* usually considered Naram-Sin the last king of Sargon's dynasty. They blamed the downfall of the Akkadian Empire on the gods' desire to punish his arrogance and misdeeds. Supposedly, Enlil sent the Gutians, a savage people from the mountains, to despoil the land and destroy Akkad. Possibly Naram-Sin's institution of divine kingship led to these tales of his disdain for the gods. However, there is no archaeological indication that Naram-Sin destroyed Enlil's temple in Nippur as *The Curse of Akkad* claimed.

In fact, inscriptions show that he repaired Enlil's temple and sponsored other building projects in Nippur, as well. Moreover, the Gutians do not seem to have moved into Mesopotamia until sometime during the reign of Naram-Sin's son, Shar-kali-sharri ("King of All Kings"). The empire survived, although at a reduced size, at least to Shar-kali-sharri's death.

Shar-kali-sharri reigned for twenty-five years (c. 2217–2193 BCE). Unlike his predecessors, he was unable to quell all the rebellions and maintain the empire's size. Puzur-Inshushinak, the governor of Elam appointed by Naram-Sin, revolted against the new ruler, established himself as king of Elam, and restored his native Elamite tongue as the state language of Elam. There were revolts in northern Mesopotamia and Syria as well, and many sites in these regions were abandoned around 2200 BCE. Many former residents of the northern area seem to have moved to the south, putting increased pressure on the resources of the empire's heartland. There are also indications that the Gutians were beginning to filter down into Mesopotamia from their mountain homeland. While their intrusion into Mesopotamia probably increased the chaos within the land, they seem to have taken advantage of the empire's decline rather than being the primary cause of its death. When Shar-kali-sharri was struck down in a palace revolt like those that had toppled Sargon's sons, the empire collapsed and anarchy reigned. The summation in the *Sumerian King List* ("Who was king? Who was not king?") described the situation succinctly.

Could a climate change have played a part in the empire's collapse? The Sumerian historiographic poem, *The Curse of Akkad*, written a little more than a century after the destruction of the city, claims that famine, caused by the Gutian invasion, also ravaged Mesopotamia. Archaeologist Harvey Weiss thinks that this tradition actually reversed the cause and effect. In 1993, during his excavations at Tell Leilan in Syria, Weiss uncovered what he believes is evidence that a century-long drought caused the end of the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia and of the contemporaneous Syrian cities (Weiss et al. 1993; Weiss 1997; Courty and Weiss 1997). A relatively abrupt change to much drier weather in the eastern Mediterranean, culminating in severe periods of drought from around 2200 to 2000–1900 BCE, would have most acutely affected the areas of the Near East where agriculture was dependent on rainfall. Drought might at least partially account for the frequent revolts against the Akkadian Empire. It would also explain the apparent movement of population from the dry farming area of northern Mesopotamia to the south where fields were irrigated by rivers and canals. Although most of his archaeological colleagues disagree with him, Weiss has joined an increasing number of scholars who recognize climatic change as a significant factor in the political and cultural changes that took place in the eastern Mediterranean from 2200 to

2000 BCE (Butzer 1995: 134–138; Kerr 1998; McMahon 2012).

Even if climatic change was largely responsible for precipitating the end of Early Bronze urbanization in Palestine and parts of Syria and Asia Minor, it probably was not the sole reason for the collapse of the Akkadian Empire. Unlike the Early Dynastic Egyptians, early Mesopotamians never developed a sense of nationhood. They remained committed to their local patron deities and their city-states. Sargon and his successors conquered the entire region and created an empire, but it remained a collection of city-states and foreign provinces rather than a nation. It was held together by force rather than by a sense of cultural unity, national identity, and common destiny. Thus, later Mesopotamian empires would experience the same problems that tore apart the Akkadian Empire: frequent internal revolts and external pressure from peoples living along Mesopotamia's borders. Strong kings could overcome these difficulties for a time, but sooner or later (usually within 100 to 200 years) the forces of destruction and decentralization would become more powerful than the ruler, causing decline and collapse.

The Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2112–2004 BCE)

Ur's Rise to Power

The *Sumerian King List* ascribes dominance over southern Mesopotamia to a Gutian dynasty in the period after the fall of Akkad. But in reality, after sacking Akkad, the Gutians seem to have controlled only Nippur and some of the territory north of it. Within a couple of decades, these “barbarians” and their kings (originally probably only chieftains) began assimilating the local culture and adopting Akkadian names. Meanwhile, Lagash, Uruk, and probably other city-states were governed by their own rulers, and a descendant of Sargon (Shu-durul) sat on the throne of Akkad for a short while at least. So, following a brief period of anarchy and chaos, the old system of local autonomy and independent city-states seems to have reestablished itself for almost a century.

The widely known and recognized Sumerian ruler Gudea (c. 2141–2122 BCE) was an *ensi* of Lagash during this period (see [Table 3.1](#)). Many of his statues and inscriptions were found during late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French excavations at Telloh, the site of Girsu, a religious center that was part of the city-state of Lagash (modern Al-Hiba). Gudea restored the

temples of Lagash and Girsu and undertook at least one raid into Elam. However, his inscriptions provide little or no information on the political situation in Mesopotamia during the so-called Gutian Period. Mesopotamia must have been relatively peaceful, though, for Lagash seems to have been prosperous, and there is no mention of any military threats. In addition, the trade routes were open; Gudea imported materials for his buildings from most of the traditional sources, including Elam, the Gulf States, and Lebanon, which were no longer attached to the Akkadian state.

Nevertheless, many people still resented having the Gutians living on Mesopotamian soil. About 2120 BCE, with the support of a few other Sumerian city-state leaders, Utuhegal, *ensi* of Uruk, attacked the remnants of the Gutians. His propagandistic inscription claimed that he rid Mesopotamia of this “stinging serpent of the hills, who was the enemy of the gods” and who “filled Sumer with evil” (Gadd 1971: 462). Utuhegal seems to have established hegemony over several other city-states, including Ur, where he installed a family member, Ur-Nammu, as governor. According to later sources, a few years later, Utuhegal seems to have accidentally drowned while fishing or building a dam, and Ur-Nammu proclaimed himself King of Ur.

Ur-Nammu’s reign (c. 2112–2095 BCE) began the Third Dynasty of Ur, also known as the Ur III Period. He rebuilt the fortification walls and defeated the *ensi* of Lagash and other rulers who refused to acknowledge Ur’s supremacy. In his fourth regnal year, he enlarged his title to “King of Sumer and Akkad.” The rapid growth of his power over southern Mesopotamia was probably due in large part to the foundation already established by Utuhegal. Ur-Nammu then seems to have extended his empire northward without much opposition, for many sites, including Ashur, had been destroyed during the latter part of the Akkadian Dynasty and had to be rebuilt. He made a treaty with Mari, cementing the alliance through a marriage of his son to the daughter of Mari’s ruler, and brought southwestern Iran back under Mesopotamian control through campaigns in Anshan and Elam. He is best known, however, not as a military leader (even though Ur-Nammu means “Warrior of the Goddess Nammu”), but as a builder. He constructed temples at several cities, placing those at Ur, Eridu, Uruk, and Nippur upon massive solid-brick platforms known as ziggurats (or ziqqurats). As we have seen in [Chapter 1](#), Mesopotamian temples had been built on platforms since Ubaid times, and because of the practice of building new temples over the ruins of previous ones, by the Jemdet Nasr Period, these platforms had become quite high. Under Ur-Nammu, the temple-platform attained its classic form as a ziggurat, a monumental stepped pyramid-like structure with several stages or levels. Ziggurats probably were intended to raise temples as close to heaven as possible so the gods would not have to come down so far to partake of their

offerings or to meet their worshippers during major festivals. The base of Ur-Nammu's ziggurat for the temple of the moon god Nanna at Ur (see [Figure 3.3](#)) measured about 200 by 140 feet. With its temple on top, it probably stood more than 100 feet high. Today, it is still about sixty-five feet high even though its temple, third stage, and about half of its second stage have eroded away.

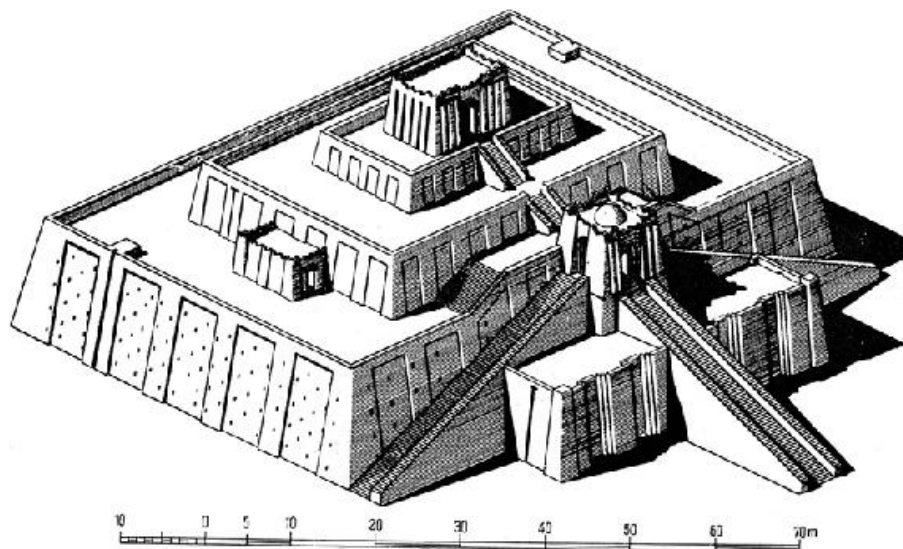


Figure 3.3 Reconstruction of the Ziggurat and Temple of Nanna, the Moon God, at Ur

This drawing shows how the temple probably looked during the Third Dynasty of Ur. Ziggurats dominated Mesopotamian cities and held the major shrines of the city god. They were believed to be the places where the divine and human world met.

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The era of Gudea and the Third Dynasty of Ur has often been characterized as a Sumerian “renaissance” or revival, during which Sumerian rulers attempted to restore their Sumerian language and cultural heritage. This view, of course, assumes that a uniquely Sumerian culture had almost vanished during the time of the Akkadian Empire. It is true that during the Ur III Period, Sumerian again became the main language for administrative documents and that Sumerian literature flourished, but there is no indication that Sumerian “culture” needed to be revived or that the language became more widely spoken. It has already been stressed that there were no major cultural differences between Sumerians and Akkadians other than language. There also is no evidence of hostility between Sumerian-speakers and Akkadian-speakers as stated or implied by some earlier historians. In fact, it is clear that the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur hearkened back to the Akkadian Empire as the foundation and pattern for their own empire and their claims of divinity. Thus,

while they established new cults for themselves, they also carefully maintained the worship of the divine Naram-Sin at Nippur. Moreover, except for Ur-Nammu and Shulgi, all of the kings, queens, and children of the “Sumerian” royal family at Ur had Akkadian names! They also gave Akkadian names to new towns they built, such as Puzrish-Dagan near Nippur. So, even the Ur III rulers may not have *spoken* Sumerian, which probably already had become essentially a dead language. The flowering of Sumerian literature during the Ur III era and the following Isin-Larsa Period may be due to the schools’ emphasis on Sumerian as a formal, exclusively written language used only by the educated class.

Shulgi’s Reforms

Ur-Nammu died in battle and was succeeded by his son Shulgi (c. 2094–2047 BCE) who completed his father’s ziggurat and temple for Nanna at Ur. The first two decades of Shulgi’s reign were peaceful, and he spent them building temples throughout Sumer and Akkad. At some point early in his reign he followed the precedent of Naram-Sin, taking the title “Ruler of the Four Quarters (of the Earth)” and declaring himself a god. He introduced a new calendar with a month named “Divine Shulgi,” and he decreed that throughout the empire priests were to make offerings to his statues twice a month. The priests of Ur and Nippur, at least, readily accepted Shulgi’s divinity and eventually produced many hymns in his honor. In these he is praised as something of a “renaissance man,” skilled in many fields from music and scholarship to hunting and warfare. In the second half of his reign, he supported the claims for his ability as a general through many military campaigns by which he extended his rule over the Zagros area of northwestern Iran (see [Map 3.1](#)). To hold this area and keep the trade routes open, Shulgi constructed a string of garrison settlements in the mountains housing between 60,000 and 100,000 men. He also built roads with relay-houses a day’s walk apart between the capital and the border districts to expedite the travel of messengers and, if necessary, to hasten the movement of troops to trouble spots. When he died after forty-eight years on the throne, Shulgi bequeathed a large, well-organized empire to his son and successor, Amar-Sin (see [Table 3.1](#))

At about the same time that he began embarking on his military conquests, Shulgi reorganized the empire. He divided Sumer and Akkad into twenty-three districts (based on the old city-state territories) and appointed an *ensi* (governor) for each. These governors were drawn from local families, but were directly responsible to the king. Earlier beliefs that individual city-state rulers

were appointed by and responsible to the local patron gods may explain why Shulgi (and his Akkadian predecessors?) claimed divinity and established cults for themselves throughout the land. As a precaution against revolt, governors were given no control over the troops garrisoned within their districts. Instead, each administrative area had one or more military commanders who answered directly to the king or his vizier. If a civil governor and military commander disagreed on policy, the issue would be settled in the courts or by the king himself. The northern and eastern parts of the empire were ruled by appointed military governors. Governors and other civil servants seem to have been transferred to new posts frequently, either because they had special skills that were needed in other problem areas or, more likely, to keep them from building a power base of local support in one place. A large contingent of royal messengers, utilizing the roads and relay-stations Shulgi constructed, kept the king informed about affairs throughout the empire. Royal inspectors periodically checked on the condition and government of the provinces.

Shulgi instituted two different kinds of taxation within the empire. The districts of Sumer and Akkad, the empire's heartland, each paid a monthly *bala* ("rotation") tax for the upkeep of the major temples, especially those of Nippur. This tax was paid with goods, as there was no currency yet. Military personnel in the peripheral areas paid a yearly tax called *gun ma-da* ("tax of the provinces") that usually consisted of animals. In addition to these revenues, tribute and booty were obtained from the conquered areas in the Zagros. Taxes and tribute were sent to regional centers where they were recorded and redistributed. Scholars are gradually learning more about this system from the thousands of economic tablets uncovered at Ur, Nippur, Girsu, Umma, and especially Puzrish-Dagan. In fact, the direct control of the economy led to an enormous bureaucracy, and there are more documents from this period than from any other time in Mesopotamian history. Shulgi built Puzrish-Dagan (modern Drehem) near Nippur to handle livestock accounting and redistribution for the region. Each year, tens of thousands of animals, paid as taxes or voluntarily contributed, came to this town from all parts of the empire. Bureaucrats then distributed them as offerings to various temples, "salary" to officials, or payments to the royal household, carefully recording in cuneiform ledgers every single arrival and departure. There were similar redistribution centers in other areas and for other commodities.

International trade was a royal monopoly, and the central government tightly controlled other aspects of the economy as well. Government-run factories employed thousands of workers (mostly women) producing leather, flour, beer, linseed oil, textiles, and other products. These commodities, along with agricultural surpluses, were traded for metals and other goods from outside the empire. Private property still existed, and there undoubtedly was a

private sector of the economy as in earlier times. However, archaeologists have uncovered few private economic documents from this time, and the multitude of royal administrative texts that exist provide little insight into the “other” economy.

Shulgi also produced the earliest law code yet known, but unfortunately, it survives only in a poorly preserved later copy. This collection of laws used to be ascribed to Ur-Nammu, but a recently recognized fragment of the prologue makes it clear that Shulgi was its author. Like later Mesopotamian examples (most notably the *Code of Hammurabi*), this list of laws was not truly a legal “code.” It was not an exhaustive compendium of laws, nor did courts refer to it when settling legal cases. In the Mesopotamian system of justice, judges reached their decisions by applying basic legal principles to the individual circumstances of the cases brought before them. Thus, Shulgi’s “code” probably was a collection of royal edicts and court decisions that would exemplify the king’s justice and illustrate the standards that should be applied throughout the empire.

Like Uruinimgina much earlier, Shulgi claimed that he prevented “grabbers” (bribe-and graft-seeking nobles and officials?) from taking citizens’ oxen, sheep, and donkeys. He established a standardized system of weights and measures and protected the weak and powerless: “I did not deliver the orphan to the rich man, the widow to the mighty man, the man with one shekel to the man with one mina [60 shekels]” (Kuhrt 1995: 71). Among the laws that survive are ones requiring that a divorced woman be compensated by her former husband—one mina of silver if she had been a virgin at the time of the marriage, and half a mina (30 shekels) if she had been previously married. Murder was punished by execution, but those who inflicted other injuries did not receive “an eye for an eye” punishment as in the *Code of Hammurabi* or the Bible. They paid monetary fines that varied with the severity of the offense.

Debating the Evidence: The Sacred Marriage Ceremony

In addition to their divine status, the Ur III kings may also have engaged in a special ritual called the Sacred Marriage Ceremony where the king became the sexual partner or spouse of the goddess Inanna. The origins, features, and purpose of the ritual have been debated, but it was clearly an essential aspect of Sumerian kingship (Cooper 1993; Sweet 1994; Lapinkivi 2004). Literary references to divine-human sexual encounters in Sumerian epic literature and titles such as the “spouse of Inanna” in Early Dynastic inscriptions suggest to some that the ritual dates back to the Early Dynastic Period or earlier

(McCaffrey 2013: 228), but most of our information comes from royal hymns and poetry of the Ur III Period and later.

Many scholars interpret the Sacred Marriage Ceremony as a part of the New Year Festival and believe that it was intended to guarantee fertility for the land, its people, and animals (Kramer 1969; Klein 1992; Bottero 2001: 155; Bertman 2003: 131–132). Originally, the citizens of each city supposedly believed that their patron god or goddess was responsible for all aspects of the city's well-being, including fertility. Each year, the people held two *Akitu* festivals at the time of the equinoxes. The first took place around September 20, the time for planting seed, while the second was held around March 20, the time of the barley harvest. Eventually, these two festivals were reduced to one and fused with the New Year celebration that came in the spring around the same time as the second *Akitu* festival.

One theory is that during the combined New Year/*Akitu* celebration, a sacred “marriage” (actually a ritual sexual mating) took place to magically ensure fertility. Ritual texts describe the bathing and pleasuring of the goddess. Therefore, most scholars presume that a human stand-in, presumably a priestess, played the part of the goddess. Some surmise that the Sumerians had come to believe that this rite reenacted the sexual union between Dumuzi (Tammuz in Semitic languages), god of vegetation and protector of herds and flocks, and Inanna (Ishtar), goddess of sexual passion and fertility. ED III and later Mesopotamians explained nature's seasonal cycles through a myth describing Inanna's journey to the underworld and how her release was secured only by having Dumuzi take her place for half the year and his sister Geshtinanna (goddess of vines) for the other half. Possibly the rise of this myth and the change in the Sacred Marriage ritual was due in large part to the development of kingship and the full attainment of male domination within Sumerian city-states (Steinkeller 1999).

Many of those who accept the existence of a Sacred Marriage ceremony think that a real sexual union took place between the participants in the rite (Kramer 1969; Roux 1992: 91; Bottero 2001; Bertman 2003: 132), while others think that the city's representative merely spent the night in a ritual bedchamber with the deity's statue, the “mating” taking place magically or symbolically (Klein 1992: 867; Böck 2004: 20; McCaffrey 2013). Surviving love songs from the Third Dynasty of Ur and Old Babylonian Period (c. 2100–1800 BCE) clearly indicate that at that time the king played the role of Dumuzi, but it is not clear whether Inanna, the goddess he “mates” with, is an image of the goddess or a priestess acting the part of the goddess. In even later times (the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian eras), it is clear that only statues were used for both the god and goddess during Sacred Marriage rites. Moreover, these ceremonies did not involve the king and were separate from the New Year

Festival (Green and Black 2000: 247). This may suggest that images were used (at least for the goddess) in earlier times as well.

Some scholars have also questioned the prevailing view that the Sacred Marriage rite was meant to ensure fertility and prosperity for the land during the New Year Festival. They argue that except for a hymn of Iddin-Dagan, none of the documents mentions New Year as the time of the rite. Moreover, long life and a successful reign for the bridegroom (king) are themes of the songs in addition to fertility. So, possibly the ritual took place on the day of the king's coronation, legitimizing his reign and deifying him at the same time. However, Philip Jones has argued that "far from augmenting the king's status, the sacred marriage marks him as a vulnerable and ultimately feminized figure" (2003: 292). Inanna takes the lead and plays the dominant (masculine) role during the ceremony, and though the king is equated with divine Dumuzi and mediates the goddess' power to the earthly sphere, he takes on a passive (feminine) role that may not have been admired by many of his subjects (Jones 2003: 302). Still others raise the possibility that the Sacred Marriage was the means by which the crown prince was conceived, either actually or symbolically, thus guaranteeing his divine parentage (Klein 1992: 868). Finally, it has also been suggested that in the Sacred Marriage ceremony the king and a priestess played the roles of the city's patron deity and his or her divine consort, and its purpose was not only to promote fertility, but also to install the priestess in her office (Frayne 1985: 12).

Despite the objections that have been raised, the traditional view is most likely the correct one. The major emphasis of the Dumuzi-Inanna love songs and the Dumuzi laments is fertility, not the establishment of the power of the king or his divinity, and not the engendering of a crown prince. This being the case, as Jacob Klein has noted,

the main purpose of the sacred marriage rite in Sumerian religion must have been to assure fertility for the land. Since the only date ever alluded to in the literary texts dealing with this ritual is New Year's Day, it is this date on which this ritual most probably took place.

(Klein 1992: 868)

The Fall of Ur

Shulgi's son Amar-Sin seems to have had a relatively uneventful reign of nine years (c. 2046–2038 BCE). He died from the "bite" of a shoe, probably an infection that resulted from a cut or some other injury to his foot. His brother Shu-Sin then became king and also ruled for nine years (c. 2037–2029 BCE).

Early in his reign, Shu-Sin had to put down several revolts in the northern and northeastern areas of the empire. The biggest threat seems to have come in his third year, for his fourth year was named “year [when] the wall of Martu [called] *Muriq-Tidnum* (‘keeping away Tidnum’) was built.” Martu was the Sumerian word for the area west of the Euphrates in what is now Syria. It also was used for the tribes of West Semitic seminomads that lived there. Tidnum and, more commonly, Amurru were Akkadian equivalents of Martu. The Amurru (or Amorites, as we call them) had made a serious raid into Mesopotamia, and though they were driven back, Shu-Sin was obviously shaken. So, he erected a fortified wall that probably stretched from the Euphrates to the Tigris just north of Baghdad (a distance of about 170 miles) to keep the Amorites out of southern Mesopotamia.

Shu-Sin’s effort proved to be futile, for early in the reign of his son, Ibbi-Sin (c. 2028–2004 BCE), groups of Amorites again attacked areas south of the wall. They were joined by the Elamites, who declared their independence and began raiding into Sumer. Ibbi-Sin fortified Ur and Nippur, but he could not prevent the raids, nor could he stop the slow disintegration of his empire. The conquered territories revolted and, one by one, the city-states of Sumer and Akkad decided to abandon the empire that could not protect them.

Just as with the end of the Akkadian Empire, several scholars have suggested that the invasions were only part of a much larger problem. After all, some Amorites had entered Mesopotamia earlier, settled, and become an important component of the Ur III state. Why then did large numbers of the seminomadic Amorites from the desert fringes invade Mesopotamia at the end of the third millennium, and why was the Ur III state unable to defeat them? One theory is that instead of causing the demise of the empire, the invaders merely “took advantage of the collapsing imperial structure” and just “made an already critical situation worse” (Kuhrt 1995: 71). Moreover, the imperial structure was collapsing, some contend, because of continuing problems due to low water levels in the rivers. Studies of Persian Gulf sediments and data from Lake Van indicate that the stream flow of the Tigris and Euphrates was very low around 2100–2000 BCE (Butzer 1995: 133, 136–137; Kay and Johnson 1981). The drought that is thought to have contributed to the end of the Akkadian Empire probably had not abated by the beginning of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Even if rainfall had improved somewhat by then, the rivers still seem to have been low. Hans Nissen believes that the many Ur III irrigation works built in already settled areas were necessary because the low water levels in the rivers reduced or negated the usefulness of earlier facilities (Nissen 1988: 194). If he is correct, it must have required more effort and more careful bureaucratic oversight to produce the high agricultural yields of the Ur III era than would have been necessary in earlier times. Any damage to the agricultural system

by enemy raids, bureaucratic mismanagement, or an inattentive ruler would result in food shortages. So, in addition to invasion, there may have been other causes for the skyrocketing increase in the price of grain to sixty times its normal rate during Ibbi-Sin's seventh and eighth years. The severe decline in grain production indicated by this inflation soon led to famine and economic collapse.

By the last years of Ibbi-Sin's reign, his kingdom consisted of no more than the city of Ur. Then the city itself fell to an onslaught by the Elamites and tribesmen from the region of Shimashki in the Zagros Mountains. The enemy plundered and destroyed the city, carrying Ibbi-Sin away to Elam. There he died in captivity.

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The Development of Civilization in Wider Western Asia

The last half of the fourth millennium and most of the third millennium BCE was not only a flourishing time for Mesopotamia and Egypt, but also for the rest of the Near East (where the era is known as the Early Bronze Age). Urbanization spread not only in the Levant, Anatolia, and Iran, but also in neighboring areas along the Persian Gulf, the Indus Valley, and the Oxus area of Central Asia. However, for reasons that are still being debated, throughout most of the region widespread destruction and serious decline brought the Early Bronze Age to an end c. 2300–2000 BCE.

Early Urbanization in the Levant and Anatolia

Early Bronze Age Syria and Palestine (c. 3700–2000 BCE)

Following the Euphrates northwards from Mesopotamia, one enters the rain-fed plains of the Syrian Jazirah and the route towards the Mediterranean Sea and the Levantine corridor. The inhabitants of this region (Upper Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine) were probably mostly Semitic speakers from at least 3000 BCE. The ancestral tongue for the Semitic language family may have originated in southern Syria and developed into subfamilies (West Semitic, East Semitic, South Semitic), each containing one or more different languages (such as Canaanite, Akkadian, and Arabic), as its speakers moved to different parts of western Asia. Akkadian, the language of the Semites who first settled in Mesopotamia, is East Semitic, but the semi-nomads who lived just west of the Euphrates River (in what is now western Iraq) spoke a West Semitic language. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), the Akkadians called these people Amurru (later

Amurru). Today the Amurru are commonly referred to as Amorites, as that is the name used for them in English translations of the Bible. In the second millennium BCE the Amorites became politically dominant in Syria and Mesopotamia, and Egyptian Old Kingdom documents attest to their presence in the Southern Levant at that time as well. However, the relationship between the Amorites and the later Semitic speakers in the Levant is not yet clear.

Palestine and Syria form a natural corridor between northern Egypt and Mesopotamia. Over Levantine roads passed almost all trade and other contacts between the early cultures of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates valleys. Largely due to contacts with the developing river-valley civilizations, the peoples of Syria and Palestine began to develop their own urban cultures during the mid-fourth millennium BCE. This initial period of urbanization in the Levant is known as the Early Bronze (EB) Age, and it has two main phases: EB I (c. 3700–3100 BCE) and EB II–III (c. 3100–2300 BCE). The final phase of the Early Bronze Age, EB IV (c. 2300–2000 BCE), witnessed the collapse of urban life in Palestine and parts of Syria and roughly corresponds with the Akkadian and Ur III Periods in Mesopotamia (Harrison 2012: 629).

After the Uruk interlude in the fourth millennium BCE (see [Chapter 2](#)), nearly all of the sites in Syria reverted to a more rural economy with regionally based local assemblages. Urban elements such as monumental temples and large centrally planned cities mostly disappear at that time. Many new features such as new pottery and seal styles emerged at this time, but archaeologists disagree about whether the different regional cultural traditions that developed were created by the native population or introduced by new groups infiltrating the land.

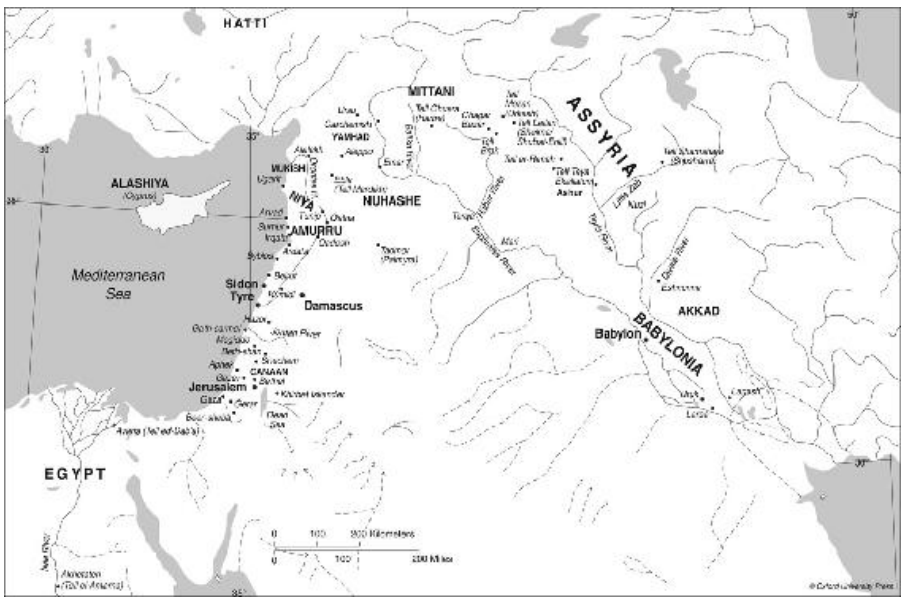
In the southern Levant (Palestine and Jordan), fundamental changes took place in the EB I, eventually leading to fully urbanized fortified cities during the EB II. The most important change during this period was in the economy, and this almost certainly was due to increased contacts with Predynastic Egypt. Previously, the people of the Levant had been seminomadic pastoralists or village-based farmers dependent on rainfall alone. Now they gradually began adopting an urban lifestyle dependent upon more productive irrigation-based agriculture and increased trade. While some earlier sites such as Jericho continued to be occupied, many were abandoned and new, larger towns such as Megiddo were created near rivers or streams that provided irrigation and drinking water. Where there were no perennial streams (such as at Arad in the Palestinian Negev), residents constructed large reservoirs to collect and store the runoff from winter rains.

By the end of the EB II Period (c. 2700 BCE), these towns were walled and housed an urban elite. Economically, the region turned to the cultivation of grapes and olives and developed a thriving trade in wine, especially with

Egypt. Egypt does not seem to have wielded political control over Palestine and coastal Syria, but it does seem to have dominated trade and to have had a strong cultural influence over those areas. The main Palestinian trade products were wine and olive oil, while timber was the primary commodity sought from Byblos and other Syrian coastal cities. During the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty, Egyptians began traveling to Byblos almost exclusively by sea, thus bypassing the Palestinian EB III cities and reducing their prosperity. Some of the destructions dated to the EB III Period in the Levant may have been caused by Egyptian invasions mentioned in Old Kingdom texts.

In the northern Levant (Lebanon and Syria), full urbanization did not return until about 2700 BCE, making the EB III Period a thriving urban era. These cities were much smaller than the cities of Mesopotamia and Egypt, but much larger than the walled towns of the southern Levant.¹ In the second half of the third millennium BCE important cities can be found in upper Mesopotamia (Tell Mozan, Tell Brak, Tell Leilan, and Carchemish), on the Mediterranean coast and Orontes river valley (Ugarit and Byblos), and in the Euphrates region (Mari) and western Syria (Ebla, Qatna) (see [Map 4.1](#)). Excavations at many of these sites have unearthed various public structures such as temples, administrative buildings, palaces, city walls, and granaries in addition to private houses. One interesting feature of Syrian culture at this time is the presence of large elite tombs located in urban centers. One such burial, called the White Monument from Tell Banat, was an artificial burial mound c. 100 m in diameter and 20 m high. The propensity for highly elaborate tombs in the second half of the third millennium BCE in Syria points to the importance of ancestor worship for the re-establishment of urban power there (Genz 2012: 618).

Syrian cities seem to have been more directly influenced by Egypt and/or Mesopotamia than were those in Palestine. Byblos has a wide array of Egyptian material dating from the Second to the Sixth Dynasties as does Ebla. Cylinder seals and art at Ebla and Mari show direct emulation of Mesopotamian styles. Despite this influence and the likelihood that the Early Bronze city-states had urban institutions that required written records, until relatively recently, archaeologists had found little evidence of local writing at Syro-Palestinian EB sites. That situation changed dramatically in 1974 during excavations at Tell Mardikh



Map 4.1 The Near East during the Bronze Age

After Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 50.

(ancient Ebla) in Syria. In the ruins of Ebla’s royal palace (destroyed around 2250 BCE), excavators found 17,000 cuneiform tablets. We now know that the village that became Ebla was founded around 3500 BCE. It developed into a city by about 2700 BCE and into a large, powerful city-state by about 2500 BCE. It seems to have controlled a large territory stretching eastward from the Orontes River to the borders of Emar on the Euphrates, and from the foothills of the Amanus and Taurus Mountains in the north to the territory of Hama on the south. Ebla conquered Mari around 2400 BCE, extending its influence into northern Mesopotamia for a time. It also developed friendly relations (and probably an alliance) with Hamazi (northeast of Mesopotamia).

The Ebla texts (see [Figure 4.1](#)) turned out to be written in the city’s native language, an archaic Semitic tongue now called Eblaite. In the 1970s and 1980s there was much scholarly debate about Eblaite’s relationship to other Semitic languages. Some linguists concluded that Eblaite was an early form of Canaanite or Amorite (both of which are West Semitic languages), while others argued that it was more closely related to East Semitic Akkadian. Today, almost all specialists in this field agree that Eblaite is an East Semitic language that is very close to the Akkadian dialects known at present. The Ebla tablets supply valuable information on trade and contact with other cities in the Levant and Mesopotamia during the Early Bronze Age.



Figure 4.1 One of the 17,000 Tablets Found in the EB IV Royal Palace G at Ebla

National Museum, Aleppo, Syria. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Ebla was just one of the centralized kingdoms in the north Syrian region in the third millennium BCE. Other city-states like Mari (Tell Hariri), Nagar/Nawar (Tell Brak), and Urkesh (Tell Mozan) in northeastern Syria were also important centers. Tell Mozan, at over 247 acres, was one of the largest sites in the region and was ruled by a hitherto unknown people of the ancient Near East, the Hurrians. Hurrian is a language well attested in the second millennium BCE (see [Chapter 6](#)), but Hurrian speakers appear to have already established themselves in northern Mesopotamia/Syria in the third millennium BCE. At Tell Mozan cuneiform inscriptions refer to a Hurrian king, Tukpish, and his wife, Uqnitum. One sealing, with an impression of the seal of Tar'am Agade, the daughter of Naram Sin, points to a possible marriage alliance between Urkesh and the Akkadian kings.

All of these sites came within the sphere of Akkadian military expansion. Palace G at Ebla was likely destroyed by either Sargon or Naram-Sin, as was the palace at Mari. At Tell Brak on the Habur River, Naram Sin built a new

palace or garrison with bricks stamped with his name.

Near the end of the third millennium BCE the region as a whole experienced a marked decline, especially acute in the southern Levant and the Habur region in Syria. Despite the continued importance of some sites (e.g., Tell Brak, Mari, and Tell Mozan), at the beginning of EB IV many sites were simply abandoned or greatly reduced in size, their inhabitants presumably returning to a pastoral lifestyle. Explanations for this “collapse” have included the migration or invasion of new residents or Egyptian campaigns into the Levant. Today, most scholars favor environmental changes coupled with socio-economic responses as explanations (see “Debating the Evidence: Explaining the Widespread Collapse”).

Early Bronze Age Anatolia

The Anatolian plateau is connected to Syria and Upper Mesopotamia by a number of mountain passes through the Taurus Mountains and along the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Cultural and economic contacts between the two regions can already be detected in the Neolithic Period (see [Chapter 1](#)). During the Early Bronze Age much of Anatolia seems to have become fairly densely populated. Many towns and at least a few cities developed during this era, especially during the flourishing era designated EB II in Anatolia (c. 2600 to 2300/2200 BCE). However, not enough Early Bronze sites and levels have been excavated to determine the full extent of Anatolia’s early urbanization. Sites where archaeologists have uncovered important EB deposits include Troy (Hissarlik), Beycesultan, Alaca Höyük, Alişar, Kanesh (Kültepe), Tarsus, Gedikli, and Zincirli. In southeastern Anatolia, large cities like Kazane Höyük and Titriş Höyük were part of the Upper Mesopotamian sphere and were even incorporated into the territorial network of the Akkadian Empire. Most of the excavated sites exhibit strongly fortified citadels, occasional destructions and restorations, and distinct regional cultural variations. These features suggest that, as in contemporary Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine, Early Bronze Anatolia was a land of small, independent city-state kingdoms. However, these cities were smaller and probably less complex than those of Syria and Mesopotamia.² So far, they have revealed no knowledge of writing.

The prosperity of Anatolia’s petty states was largely dependent upon exploitation of the region’s wealth of metallic ores. Anatolia’s mountains contained an abundance of iron (which could not yet be fully utilized), copper and silver, and some lead. As metallurgical knowledge spread during the Early

Bronze Age, Anatolia became one of the principal suppliers of metals and metal products to the rest of the Near East. Recent excavations in the south at a mine in Kestel/Göltepe have shown conclusively that tin was mined there in the third millennium BCE (Yener and Vandiver 1993). The objects from several “treasures” uncovered by archaeologists have revealed the EB Anatolians’ skill in casting and beating metal. The so-called Treasure of Priam and materials from burials at Troy in Anatolia’s northwestern corner included bronze axes, daggers, chisels, saws, nails, earrings, pins, rings, and bowls, as well as silver and gold jewelry and vases. The “Dorak Treasure,” supposedly from another group of tombs in the Troad, contained similar objects, some of even higher craftsmanship than those found at Troy, but its authenticity is hotly disputed. Thirteen “Royal Tombs” at Alaca Höyük yielded bronze stags inlaid with silver, elaborate bronze open grillwork ornaments (called “standards” for lack of a better word, see [Figure 4.2](#)), weapons (including a dagger with an iron blade), and golden figurines, jugs, cups, and jewelry (pins, bracelets, and a filigree diadem with a ribbon tassel, also of gold).



Figure 4.2 Bronze Standard from the Royal Graves of Alaca Höyük, c. 2400 BCE

Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey. © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY, ART406569.

There was trade and probably some sharing of ideas between western Anatolia (especially Troy) and the developing towns and small cities of Greece

and the Aegean islands during the Early Bronze era. Merchants in Anatolia and the Aegean probably traded grain, wine, cloth, and other perishable materials in addition to the metal weapons, jewelry, marble idols or figurines, and pottery vessels that archaeologists can document. The pottery wheel was also introduced into Greece from the Near East during this period. Most of the trade between Greece and Asia Minor seems to have moved along maritime routes through the Aegean Sea, for ships with twenty to thirty-five oars on a side are frequently depicted on Greek and Cycladic pottery vessels. Unfortunately, the increase in trade and prosperity probably also led to the growth of piracy in the Aegean region. Inland Greek towns were usually not fortified, but coastal sites generally found it necessary to protect themselves with defensive walls. Archaeologists have uncovered Early Bronze fortifications at Poliochni on Lemnos, Thermi on Lesbos, Emporio on Chios, Chalandriani on Syros, Phylakopi on Melos, Aegina in the Saronic Gulf, Askitarion on the east coast of Attica, and Lerna on the Bay of Nauplion in the Peloponnese. Despite their walls, some of these towns were destroyed more than once during the third millennium.

Western Anatolian goods even made their way down to southeastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia during the Early Bronze Age. Anatolian interregional contacts thus stretched from southeastern Europe to northern Mesopotamia and northeastwards to the Caucasus. As in the southern Levant, it is trade, especially in metals, that seems to have spurred the urbanization and state formation of Anatolian sites in the Early Bronze Age.

Debating the Evidence: Explaining the Widespread Collapse

As we have seen, the Early Bronze Age brought increasing urbanization, technological advances, and expanded networks of trade to the periphery of Mesopotamia and Egypt, in Syria, the Levant, Anatolia, and even across the Aegean to Greece. But many of these areas suffered widespread destruction or decline near the end of the Early Bronze Age.

Nearly all the Palestinian EB III towns and villages were destroyed around 2300–2200 BCE and lay abandoned for about two centuries. During the following EB IV Period, urban civilization disappeared in Palestine, and only a few poor villages continued to exist. The size of the population dropped drastically, largely leaving the land to groups of pastoral seminomads (Richard 1987; Rosen 1997). Most of the towns in Asia Minor and Greece were also destroyed c. 2300–2200 BCE, at the end of the period that in Anatolia is called

Early Bronze II and in Greece, Early Helladic II. In the period following these destructions, there were only about one-fourth as many settlements in Anatolia as there had been in EB II (Mellaart 1971: 406). The material culture in western and southern Anatolia also declined significantly. Though some areas recovered by c. 2000 BCE, others remained without settled population centuries longer. In Greece, the destruction was not universal, for several sites continued to exist without interruption into the Early Helladic III era. Nevertheless, according to M. I. Finley, the change at the end of EH II was “so massive and abrupt, so widely dispersed” that “nothing comparable was to happen until the end of the Bronze Age a thousand years later” (Finley 1981: 13). James Mellaart used nearly the same words to describe what happened in Anatolia at the end of EB II, calling it “a catastrophe of such magnitude as to remain unparalleled until the very end of the Bronze Age” (Mellaart 1971: 406). However, as in Palestine, there are few signs of new artifacts or radical changes in the material culture after the destructions, and there was not much destruction at the end of the Early Helladic III Period that followed.³ Meanwhile, at the same time as these Near Eastern and Aegean destructions, the level of the Nile floods was extremely low, causing hardship and turmoil in Egypt and contributing to the collapse of the Old Kingdom (Hassan 1997).

In recent years, evidence for a widespread or even global climatic event around 2200 BCE has been mounting. This is sometimes referred to as the 4.2 kya event (4,200 years ago), although its cause, extent and impact are debated (Meller et al. (eds.) 2015). A few scholars have suggested that impacts made by the remnants of a comet possibly caused widespread climatic deterioration at the end of the Near Eastern Early Bronze Age. Aerial photographs of southern Iraq revealed a two-mile-wide circular depression with the classic hallmarks of a meteor crater, including a ring-like ridge inside its outer edges. Around 2200 BCE, the area in question would have been covered by the northern end of the Persian Gulf or by shallow marshes. Because the sediments in that region were all deposited within the past 6,000 years, this crater must have been produced within that time span. Moreover, soil samples from three regions of the Near East taken from levels dating from c. 2200 BCE contained microscopic spheres of calcite material not found on Earth but commonly found in meteorites. However, only one impact of the size indicated by the Iraqi depression probably would have affected only the southern portion of Mesopotamia and would have had no more than a temporary effect on weather patterns. On the other hand, if several large fragments hit other parts of the planet at the same time, their cumulative effect might have produced a climatic change, causing the drought that Weiss and others have postulated for the Habur region of Syria (Hawkes 1997; Master 2001; Matthews 2001). The depression will have to be carefully investigated to see if it is actually an impact crater and if so,

whether it can be dated more exactly. As of this writing, however, that has not been done.

Caused by meteor impact or not, there seems to have been a relatively dry period in much of the Near East during the last phase of the Early Bronze Age and during the Egyptian First Intermediate Period (c. 2300–2000 BCE). It is evidence of this dry period that Weiss feels he has uncovered at Tell Leilan. Study of sediment layers in Lake Van and Lake Zeribar (in the Zagros Mountains) indicates that their levels (and thus, also the levels of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that receive drainage from those areas) were very low around 2200 BCE. Moreover, segments of sediment cores from the sea bed of the Gulf of Oman radiocarbon-dated to about 2000 BCE (± 100 years) show two to six times more evidence of wind-borne Mesopotamian silt than segments from earlier or later times. This suggests that dry conditions around the end of the third millennium BCE had turned parts of Mesopotamia into a dust bowl (Butzer 1995: 136–137; Kerr 1998).

Major migrations also may have occurred during this time. In the past, many archaeologists argued that the people of EB IV Palestine were pastoral invaders, but today, most see them as remnants of the EB III population (Richard 1987; Mazar 1990: 169–170). Also, it was once generally accepted that the destructions in Greece and Asia Minor resulted from invasions by groups speaking Indo-European languages. However, in recent years that consensus has vanished as scholars have challenged the assumptions that new languages are introduced only by massive migration or invasion and that continuity in material culture indicates that no linguistic or ethnic change took place (Renfrew 1987; Hooker 1999).

Today, scholars are less inclined to credit the end of the Early Bronze Age cultures in the eastern Mediterranean area to invasions or ethnic movements. However, some population movements probably did take place. Hurrians began occupying the mountains of southeastern Anatolia and northern Syria, the Gutians and Amorites invaded Mesopotamia, and seminomads settled in the Delta area of Egypt. But these movements probably were symptoms of the problem, not its causes. Weather changes and internal strife can cause as much devastation to cultures as massive invasions, and they were probably largely responsible for the end of the urbanized Early Bronze Age. The revival of urbanism in much of the eastern Mediterranean area occurred only after 2000–1900 BCE, when moister weather seems to have returned.

Of course, as Karl Butzer notes (1997), not everyone agrees with the drought hypothesis. Amihai Mazar argues that while urbanization ended in Palestine, it seems to have continued in the Transjordanian highlands east of the Dead Sea, an area that a weather change probably would have affected as much as Palestine. Also, archaeologists have found small Early Bronze IV settlements in

the normally dry areas of the Palestinian Negev and northern Sinai (Mazar 1990: 145–148). On the other hand, these EB IV towns and settlements were located by perennial streams or springs, which may have allowed their populations to survive and adapt to the changing conditions. And, as Arlene Rosen has pointed out, “failure to adapt to changing climatic conditions can be as much a social problem as a technological one” (Rosen 1997: 25). She suggests that most of the Early Bronze Palestinian towns were probably unable to make the change from floodwater farming to canal irrigation farming, while some of the Transjordanian settlements, because of their locations, did manage to adapt and survive. Thus it is society’s ability to respond to climate events that determines a civilization’s trajectory more than climate change itself.

Persian Gulf and Central Asian Civilizations

Early Bronze Age Developments in Iran

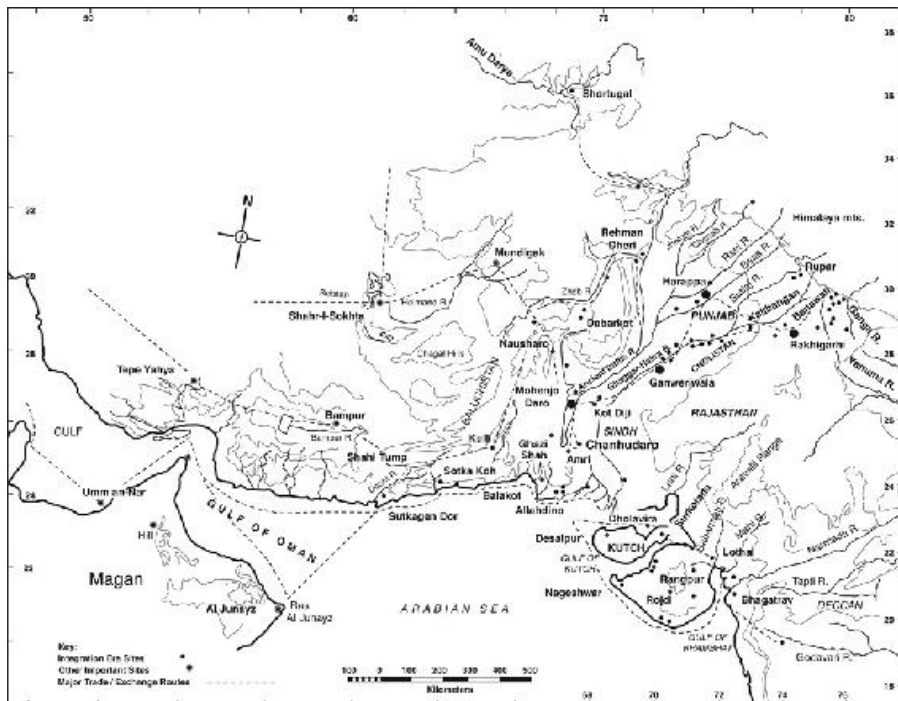
In the Early Bronze Age Iran followed a similar trajectory to Mesopotamia. Elam, of course, had been urbanized as early as Mesopotamia, probably under the influence of Uruk. Uruk influence in Elam was replaced around 3200 BCE with what has been called Proto-Elamite culture (see [Chapter 2](#)). The center of Proto-Elamite power was concentrated at the sites of Tall-i-Malyan in modern Fars province, and Susa in Khuzistan, but Proto-Elamite influence can be seen at several sites in the central Iranian plains as well as in eastern Iran. These sites, Tepe Sialk, Tepe Hissar, and Shahr-i Sokhta, may have served as outposts of western Proto-Elamite sites.

The Proto-Elamite polity collapsed sometime around 2900/2800 BCE and there appears to have been a return to more nomadic communities. Susa retreated from its central Iranian contacts and turned once again to Mesopotamian cultural styles. It is during this period that Susa became a part of the kingdom of Elam, which must have coalesced around this time. However, almost all of our information about this fledgling state comes from Mesopotamian sources, which mostly boast of their conquests of Elam. According to these sources, Elam vacillated between independence and Mesopotamian control for most of the third millennium BCE.

After the decline of Proto-Elamite influence, urban centers flourished in the eastern and southeastern regions of the Iranian Plateau (see [Map 4.2](#)). Some of these sites such as Tepe Yahya and Shahdad continued to grow during the

Early Dynastic Period and exhibit ties with Mesopotamian cities. Sites on the plateau such as Tepe Hissar also grew enormously and show interconnections with sites in Turkmenistan (Central Asia). Recently (largely since 1996), two urban sites, probably the centers of local civilizations, have been found in eastern Iran: Shahr-i Sokhta, about thirty-four miles south of modern Zabol in Sistan-Baluchestan Province; and Jiroft on the Halil-Rud River in Kerman Province. Shahr-i Sokhta goes back to about 3200–3000 BCE and Jiroft to about 2700–2500 BCE. Both were destroyed c. 2200–2100 BCE, at the end of the Early Bronze Age. It had been thought that much of Iran remained nonurbanized in the third millennium BCE, populated by seminomadic peoples. Now that view is undergoing massive revision.

In 1978, Italian archaeologists began to excavate Shahr-i Sokhta (“Burned City,” so-called because of the evidence for three separate fiery destructions c. 2700, 2400, and 2100 BCE). However, the Islamic Revolution in Iran forced them to abandon their work soon afterward. The site, near the border between Iran and Afghanistan (see [Map 4.2](#)), has been excavated since 1996 by an international team of archaeologists led by Iranian archaeologist Mansur Sajjadi. Shahr-i Sokhta was established c. 3200 BCE but became a large center only in the mid-third millennium BCE. It is a huge site covering more than 370 acres. The excavators uncovered a large, probably public, building (function unknown) with seventeen rooms and two staircases. Inside they found hundreds of artifacts, including cloth, ropes, pottery vessels, wooden and stone objects, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic clay figurine seals, and seal



Map 4.2 Major Sites and Trade Routes of Eastern Iran and the Indus Valley

Adapted from Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Fig. 3.3, p. 50.

impressions. Other monumental buildings (including what was probably a temple), workshops, and residences have also been uncovered. Evidence for working lapis lazuli and other fine stones such as chalcedony suggest the source of the community's wealth. The nearby cemetery contained about 40,000 graves, and the excavated ones contained cylindrical and flat beads (almost all in women's graves), multicolored cloth, ornamental dishes made of soapstone, tools, and food. Study of the bodies found in the graves indicates that the average life expectancy of "Burned City" residents was 40.5 years. The oldest individual found so far was a woman who died at age 60. An example of Proto-Elamite writing has been found, but so far no tablets or archives have come to light. Especially interesting finds from the site include the earliest known backgammon board, a ruler for making measurements, a dish with what some archaeologists believe is the world's oldest "animated" picture drawn around it, and most surprising of all, an artificial eye.

Jiroft was discovered in 2000 after a flash flood uncovered many tombs, and it has been excavated since 2002 by an international team of archaeologists led by Yousef Madjidzadeh. Founded around 2700 BCE, some three to five centuries later than Shahr-i Sokhta, Jiroft also became a trade hub and may have been

the center of another Iranian civilization (Lawler 2004). So far, 100 sites have been located in the region along the Halil-Rud River. The city, called Konar Sandal, surrounded by a thirty-four-foot-thick wall, is almost a mile in diameter and contains the largest platform building (ziggurat?) yet known (fifty-four feet high with each side 1,280 feet long) and a large two-story citadel or palace whose base covers thirty-three acres. Several residential areas also have been excavated. Plentiful water for drinking and irrigation was obtained not only from the nearby river, but also from a network of arte-sian wells. Because of the abundance of water, Jiroft's agriculture was based on date palms rather than on cereals as in Mesopotamia.

Though the workshops have not yet been found, the area around Jiroft must have been a center for carving vessels out of stone such as pink and orange alabaster, white marble, and especially chlorite, a soft, fine-grained, gray-green stone. Archaeologists have found thousands of carved and decorated chlorite cups, vases, and boxes, but unfortunately many thousands more were looted by the local farmers and sold on the international market between 2000 and 2002 when the Iranian authorities moved in. Such "intercultural style" vessels (see [Figure 4.3](#)) have been found far afield in Mari, Mesopotamia, Tarut Island in the Persian Gulf, Oman and the Indus valley. Rather than having been made almost exclusively for Mesopotamian markets as once thought, thousands of new chlorite vessels seem to have been manufactured only for use as burial goods. None of those found in tombs showed any signs of use and none contained even trace amounts of food, oil, drugs, or perfume. Copper and bronze figurines, goblets, and bowls (one with an eagle seated at its center) have also been found, and nearby copper mines have been located that probably produced the ores from which such objects were made.

Madjidzadeh claims to have found writing in an unknown script on a small seal from the site, indicating that Jiroft was a true civilization, one he identifies with Aratta, a place mentioned in a c. 2500 BCE inscription from Uruk (Covington 2004). The Uruk text indicates that the people of Aratta skillfully worked gold and silver, cut translucent lapis lazuli in blocks, and fashioned electrum. Other scholars such as Karl Lamberg-Karlovsky of Harvard and Abbas Alizadeh of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago doubt that Jiroft was Aratta or that the scratches found by Madjidzadeh are writing (Covington 2004). Lamberg-Karlovsky scoffs at exaggerated claims that Jiroft was the earliest Near Eastern civilization and the source of many elements of Mesopotamian civilization. He argues that nothing has been found at Jiroft that is earlier than c. 2500 BCE:

To try to put Jiroft on the same level as the Sumerian, Egyptian and Indus Valley civilizations, or even as the Bactrian material of central Asia, is to exaggerate and distort the archaeological record. Jiroft is just not in the same ballpark.

Even so, recent excavations (2005–2007) have turned up true writing at Jiroft in the form of four baked brick tablets dated to the mid- to late third millennium BCE with a heretofore unknown geometric script. These bricks or tablets also contain signs from Linear-Elamite, a script known from second millennium BCE Susa. This has raised the possibility that Elamite writing originated at Jiroft and that power shifted from east to west and not the other way around (Madjidzadeh 2012).



Figure 4.3 An Intercultural-Style Vessel Found at Early Dynastic Nippur, c. 2500 BCE

Carved vessels in this style seem to have originated in southeastern Iran.

Though small in number, the Iranian cities found so far seem to have belonged to an interactive sphere that included contacts with Afghanistan, the Indus valley, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Mesopotamian urban centers. In fact, Michèle Casanova, a French archaeologist working at Shahr-i Sokhta, has argued that many of the artifacts found in the Sumerian “Royal Tombs” at Ur came from Shahr-i Sokhta, Jiroft, and the Oxus civilization. She points out that ornamental soapstone dishes were fairly common at Shahr-i Sokhta and were found in graves of ordinary people, but at Ur they seem to have been considered precious and were found only in temples and “royal” tombs (Mehr News Agency 2006). Archaeologists have also uncovered chlorite vessels with imagery like those from Jiroft at Mesopotamian sites (such as Mari, Nippur, Uruk, and Ur), Soch in Uzbekistan, and the Saudi Arabian island of Tarut, north of Bahrain. The vast number of such chlorite objects found at Jiroft and the imagery on the vessels found elsewhere suggests that Jiroft was the source for some if not most of the chlorite vessels in other areas. However, Lamberg-Karlovsky claims that chemical analysis of chlorite pieces from Mesopotamia, Tarut, and elsewhere shows they were mined in the areas where they were found (Covington 2004). Some of the chlorite objects at Jiroft are inlaid with lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, carnelian from the Indus valley, and various other imported semi-precious stones such as turquoise and agate. So, Jiroft and Shahr-i Sokhta also seem to have maintained trade relations with the two other civilizations beyond the eastern and northeastern borders of the Near East, the Indus valley civilization and the Oxus civilization (discussed in the next section), and may have served as intermediaries between them and Mesopotamia. It’s possible that this region was the region the Mesopotamians called Marhashi, an important diplomatic and economic partner of the Ur III state (Potts 2004). Yet, at the end of the Early Bronze Age, at or around 2000 BCE, the large Iranian centers in the east (Jiroft, Tepe Yahya, Shahr-i Sokhta) were abandoned or destroyed, possibly due to the climatic shifts at the end of the Bronze Age or to economic factors that favored new trade routes bypassing the Iranian plateau. Eastern Iran never recovered, but the old Proto-Elamite centers of Anshan and Susa once again rose to prominence as the powerful new entity called Elam.

Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha

Bordering Iran to the east and the north were two further regions that developed into thriving civilizations in the third millennium BCE. The Indus (or

Harappan) civilization developed along and near the Indus River and its tributaries in what is now Pakistan and northwestern India. The Central Asian Oxus civilization, unknown until the 1970s, emerged in southeastern Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (former Soviet Republics) just north of Afghanistan. These two civilizations seem to have arisen independently c. 2500 to 2300 BCE, though their knowledge of agriculture may have been derived indirectly from Mesopotamia through Iran. It is possible that these cultures also received other stimuli from Iran and Mesopotamia through their contacts with Iranian towns such as Tepe Yahya, Shahr-i Sokhta, and Jiroft. However, they did not borrow or copy Mesopotamian institutions. They developed their own unique patterns of urbanization rooted in their local environments and their different social and economic systems.

During the latter half of the third millennium BCE, Mesopotamia engaged in trade with three foreign countries—Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha—reached via the Persian Gulf. They were often mentioned in texts of the Akkadian and Ur III Periods, so for a long time, scholars have known of their existence. Moreover, the consistent order in which the names were written indicated that Dilmun was closest to Mesopotamia and Meluhha the furthest away. It is only in the past few decades, though, that archaeology has been able to reveal the probable locations of these lands.

Dilmun almost certainly comprised the present-day islands of Bahrain and Failaka, though it probably also included part of the eastern Arabian coast and all or part of Qatar. Excavations have revealed that this area came under strong Mesopotamian influence during the latter part of the Ubaid Period (c. 4700–3700 BCE) and reached the height of its prosperity in the late third and early second millennia BCE. Archaeologists have uncovered large temples on raised platforms (but not multistory ones) at several sites, and at Qal'at Bahrain they found an enclosed area containing a storeroom, houses, and a workshop for manufacturing stamp seals. Despite these connections with Mesopotamia, few post-Ubaid Mesopotamian imports have been found in the area. On the other hand, several sites in what was probably Dilmun's territory have revealed pieces of Indus pottery, and Dilmun's system of weights and measures was identical to that of the Indus civilization. This evidence agrees with textual indications that Dilmun was an intermediary in the trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley. Dilmun probably imported copper and precious stones from Magan and the Indus region and shipped much of it on to Mesopotamia. Dilmun also supplied pearls from its own waters. Mesopotamian texts indicate that, in exchange, large amounts of barley were shipped to Dilmun, most of which this kingdom retained to feed its own population. Other Mesopotamian goods such as textiles and manufactured products, as well as Dilmun's Gulf pearls, were sent on to Magan and the Indus valley in

trade for their metal, ivory, and other goods. One vexing question is whether the Dilmun civilization had its own writing system. Other than a few Akkadian inscriptions and a few Indus signs on Persian Gulf style seals, no other written evidence has survived from the region (Crawford 1998: 18). Names from Failaka Island off of Kuwait may be related to Amorite and suggest that the Dilmunites and possibly the Maganites were Semitic speakers.

Most scholars now agree that Magan, once thought to be in southern Iran, encompassed the southeastern area of the Arabian Peninsula at the end of the Persian Gulf, just south of the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman (see [Map 4.2](#)). This region is now occupied by the eastern portion of the United Arab Emirates and the northern part of Oman. This area was rich in metals and fine stone, materials prized in Mesopotamia. At Maysar in Oman, archaeologists have found installations for copper mining, crushing, and smelting and many finished copper ingots. Magan shipped copper ingots and ore to Mesopotamia, sometimes by way of Dilmun, in exchange for manufactured bronze objects and other finished products, some of which turned up at sites in Oman. Magan was also a source for ivory, diorite (a hard black stone prized for statuary), and other materials from the Indus area. As we have seen, for a brief time during the Akkadian Empire, Magan was probably conquered by Akkad and at least made a subject ally to assure the continued flow of its products to Mesopotamia well into the Ur III Period. Archaeology has uncovered several fort sites that relate to the culture of ancient Magan, round mud-brick buildings that served as the centers of small kingdoms. Important funerary monuments of the third millennium at sites such as Umm an Nar and Tel Abraq were rich in imported luxury goods. The finest example, the tumulus of Tell Abraq (c. 2100 BCE) contained imported items from Dilmun, the Indus, Iran, and Central Asia, and luxury items such as linen, ivory, and bronze.

The many Indus stamp seals, etched carnelian beads, and other products uncovered at sites along the Persian Gulf and in Mesopotamia proved that Mesopotamia, Dilmun, and Magan were actively involved in trade with the Indus civilization between c. 2400 and 1900 BCE. These finds suggested that the Indus area was Meluhha. But, while some of the trade between Mesopotamia and Meluhha undoubtedly came through Magan and Dilmun, as well as by land routes through Iran, textual references showed that much of it arrived directly by sea. An Akkadian inscription claims that ships from Meluhha docked at Akkad, and an Ur III text refers to a “Meluhha village,” probably a merchant settlement or trade depot, within Lagash’s territory. A cylinder seal of a “Meluhha translator” also suggested direct contact between Mesopotamians and representatives of Meluhha. It is only since the 1950s, when archaeologists discovered Lothal and other Indus civilization ports (see [Map 4.2](#)), that evidence has indicated that this culture was directly involved

with maritime trade. Thus, it is now generally agreed that the Indus valley (or at least the coastal region around the mouth of the Indus) must have been the distant place known to the Mesopotamians as Meluhha.

The Indus civilization is also known as the Harappan civilization after Harappa, one of its largest sites and one of the first to be excavated. As we have seen, this civilization developed in Pakistan and northwest India around 2600 to 2500 BCE, probably from earlier cultures in the area. By the time it came into direct contact with Mesopotamia c. 2400 BCE, the Indus civilization had spread to cover an area from the banks of the Oxus River in the north to the Narmada River south of New Delhi, and from Iran on the west to the Ganges plain on the east (see [Map 4.2](#)). So far, archaeologists have found more than 700 Indus settlements in this immense expanse that is more than 750 miles long and equally as wide, an area far larger than that occupied by either Egypt or Mesopotamia. Most Indus settlements were small, but three were huge: Harappa in the highlands of the Punjab, Ganweriwala on a now dried-up river almost 190 miles southwest of Harappa, and Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus lowlands almost 200 miles further to the southwest (see [Map 4.2](#)). Some archaeologists argue that these three cities, which despite their distance from one another display exactly the same culture, were regional capitals in a tripartite political organization. Others think that there was a unified Indus empire with Mohenjo-Daro as its capital and the other two cities as secondary capitals. On the other hand, as the greatest cluster of sites is around Ganweriwala, the civilization may have begun in that region and then spread north and south, with Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro becoming capitals of the “provincial” or “colonial” regions. It is also possible that like Early Dynastic Mesopotamia or later Classical Greece, the Indus civilization exhibited a common culture, but had several (or maybe many) independent city-states rather than a single unified “state.” More excavation, especially of early strata, is needed to clarify the origins, growth, and organization of this civilization.

Indus archaeology of the last few decades has upended some of the older notions about Harappan society. Several features once considered characteristic of the Harappan civilization are now shown to be misinterpretations of the archaeological material (Poessehl 2002: 246–248). All the Indus settlements, whether large or small, display careful town planning, but not along a grid plan as once thought and not generally using baked bricks. No palaces or temples have been identified, and public buildings that were once thought to be communal granaries are more likely warehouses. One unique feature of Harappan life is the emphasis on water in Harappan towns. Indus cities had well-planned drainage systems with private indoor latrines that emptied into covered drains. In place of a fortified citadel a large public (?) bath dominates the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Dholavira. The inevitable conclusion is that

water played an important symbolic role in Indus ideology.

Unfortunately, our knowledge of the Indus society and its political, economic, religious, and social structures is very sketchy and hypothetical, for we have no readable texts. The Indus culture did develop what looks like a writing system, probably inspired by ideas from Mesopotamia and Iran. The script probably consists primarily of syllabograms (signs for sounds or syllables), for it has almost 400 signs—too many for an alphabet and too few for every sign to be a word. Most inscriptions are on seals (see [Figure 4.4](#)) and are short (usually only four to six signs long), with few containing more than ten signs. None has more than twenty-six signs. However, nothing resembling economic, literary, or historical documents has turned up, so there will still be large gaps in our knowledge of the Indus culture even if, or when, the script is deciphered.



Figure 4.4 Indus Stone Seals with Brief Inscriptions in the Undeciphered Indus Script

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It is surprising that although archaeologists have found many Harappan or Meluhhan artifacts at Mesopotamian sites, they have not identified comparable Mesopotamian artifacts in the Indus valley. A few Persian Gulf seals were uncovered at the coastal site of Lothal, so much of the trade with Mesopotamia

could have gone through middlemen in Magan or Dilmun. However, as we have seen, Mesopotamian texts mention Meluhhan ships and Meluhhan merchants at Mesopotamian cities. The Indus civilization must have imported only perishable commodities or raw materials from Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian texts indicate that Mesopotamians were importing hardwoods, tin or lead, copper, gold, silver, carnelian, pearls, shell, ivory, and exotic animals (peacocks or chickens (?), monkeys, a red dog, etc.), while exporting wool, incense, and gold (Kenoyer 1998: 98).

The absence of Mesopotamian seals or other objects in Indus cities, plus the formal layout of the cities, standardization of products, emphasis on sanitation, and lack of evidence of wealth-based social stratification, among other features of the archaeological record, suggest to some scholars that the Indus society was caste- rather than class-structured. In a caste system, individuals belong to exclusive groups, usually defined by their functions or occupational duties. Status is dependent on caste identity rather than wealth. Individuals must marry within their own caste, and social contact with those outside the caste results in pollution that must be ritually cleansed. Even contact with the material culture of someone outside of the caste is sometimes thought to cause pollution. Thus, if such a system existed in the ancient Indus civilization, the rigid planning and standardization, lack of emphasis on accumulation of wealth, and disdain for finished products from other cultures would be understandable (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995: 211–213). However, the scholars who support this interpretation are perhaps relying too much on later Indian culture and may be reading too much into the evidence. The absence of Mesopotamian cylinder seals or seal impressions in the Indus archaeological record might indicate only that “Mesopotamian traders were not directly involved with the Indus trade and that no bundles of goods sealed by Mesopotamian merchants were being sent to the Indus cities” (Kenoyer 1998: 98). The importation of raw materials and export of finished products, especially beads, must have been profitable, so economics, rather than a caste-oriented society, may better explain the situation revealed by archaeology.

The Indus civilization’s contacts with Mesopotamia end around 1900 BCE. Not long afterward, around 1800 to 1700 BCE, the Indus cities were abandoned and the civilization crumbled, all but forgotten until archaeologists uncovered its remains in the early 1900s. What caused this collapse is unknown. It was often asserted that the *Rig-Veda*, an ancient Hindu sacred epic, claims that Indo-European invaders called Aryans, armed with bronze weapons and riding in light horse-drawn chariots, destroyed the cities they found in India. Several modern scholars argue that this tradition is based on fact. Some cities, especially in the central region, were burned, and at Mohenjo-Daro, archaeologists found the skeletal remains of as many as thirty unburied bodies

in the streets, some showing signs of violence. However, other scholars have pointed out that the idea of a massive Aryan invasion is based on a misreading and misunderstanding of the *Rig-Veda* and has no basis in the archaeological record. Most of the cities seem to have been abandoned rather than destroyed by military action and there is no persuasive evidence of newcomers in the area. New analysis of the Mohenjo-Daro skeletons shows that they were victims of disease, not violence, and hastily buried. In fact, it is probable that the collapse was not sudden, but took place in stages. The settlements in northwest India east of the Indus River seem to be later and may have been built by refugees from the earlier Indus centers that were in decline. Settlements along the Ganges to the east also begin to rise about this time. The decline itself, though, remains to be explained.

Today a variety of theories are advanced in place of the “Aryan invasion” theory (McIntosh 2008: 396–400). Based mainly on the skeletal data from Mohenjo-Daro, a few modern scholars have argued that an outbreak of a deadly disease (malaria and probably cholera) might have severely disrupted life in the Indus valley (Ewald 1991). An epidemic, though, would probably have resulted in many large cemeteries containing burials primarily from the last phase of the civilization. Archaeologists have not found evidence of extremely large numbers of late burials. Another possibility is that environmental changes, due to nature and/or human activity, may have caused the civilization’s demise. There is evidence of massive flooding at Mohenjo-Daro, a possible change in the course of the Indus River and the drying up of the Sarasvati River, an area of intense cultivation. Those cities on the now dry rivers from which the water had been diverted obviously had to be abandoned. However, some argue that while chronic flooding on the one hand or dry riverbeds on the other might explain why cities such as Mohenjo-Daro, Chanhudaro, and Ganweriwala were abandoned, it is hard to imagine that Indus floods would have reached all the way to Harappa or that they could have caused the collapse of a civilization that spread over such a large area. The situation may have been exacerbated by ecological devastation due to overexploitation. The cutting of timber to support the smelting of bronze and the baking of bricks at Indus sites and the overcultivation of millet likely had deleterious effects on the Harappans’ ability to make a living. Other climatic indicators suggest that changes in sea levels and reduced rainfalls led to the abandonment of port cities with a subsequent effect on long-distance maritime trade. At the same time, changes in the political and economic focus of southern Mesopotamia and Babylonia might also have affected the prosperity of Indus traders.

Population then probably shifted from the Indus valley to the monsoon-dominated regions to the east. As archaeologist Jonathan Kenoyer has noted,

“the first urban civilization of the subcontinent gradually faded into the background as new cultures emerged at the eastern and northern edges of the Indus Valley region,” a gradual process that took centuries (1998: 173). As is usual in such discussions, any or all of these “explanations” may have been factors: the last word has yet to be spoken.

Debating the Evidence: The Indus Script and the People(s) of the Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus script ranks with Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the Chinese syllabary as one of the world’s earliest writing systems. In fact, a recent discovery of proto-Indus signs on potsherds from Harappa dated to c. 3500 BCE may make this the earliest of the three writing systems (Whitehouse 1999). It is also the only one of these writing systems that has defied all attempts at decipherment. Decipherment is hampered by the fact that Indus inscriptions are very short and there are no existing bilingual texts.

While the decoding of the script will solve an archaeological mystery, the short Indus inscriptions are unlikely to provide much new economic or historical information. Instead, what is at stake is the ethnic identity of the people of the Indus valley civilization and identifying the indigenous people of South Asia. For this reason the decipherment of the Indus script has become a contentious issue in modern historical and archaeological debates.

There have, in fact, been many “decipherments” of the Indus script over the last century. These generally fall into three categories and often demonstrate the personal biases of the academics doing the deciphering. There are those scholars who believe the Indus script to represent a language isolate—a language that has no known relatives. In 1932 the famous Egyptologist Flinders Petrie deciphered the Indus script as a pictographic scheme based on supposed similarities to Egyptian hieroglyphs. Without identifying the underlying language Petrie could read the script, which was basically a list of titles and objects (Robinson 2015: 147).

Then there are scholars who consider the Indus script to represent a known ancient language from outside the Indus valley region. In 1974 the Assyriologist James Kinnier Wilson proposed that the Indus language was related to Sumerian and that both the Indus people and the Sumerians were of the same stock (Wilson 1974).

The majority of scholars, however, argue for an early form of the dominant Indian language groups: Dravidian, the indigenous language spoken in southern India (Teluga, Tamil, Malayam, etc.) or Vedic Sanskrit, the

predecessor to the modern Aryan languages of north India (Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, etc.). The most influential proponent of the Aryan hypothesis is Shikaripura Ranganatha Rao (1982), an esteemed Indian archaeologist. S. R. Rao believed that the Indus signs were a progenitor of the Semitic alphabet. When he applied Semitic values to the Indus signs he concluded that the words were a form of proto-Sanskrit (an early Indo-Aryan language used to write the *Rig-Veda*). Rao helped to bolster a Hindu nationalist view that Hindi speakers (the Aryans) are not relative newcomers to India but had been the original Bronze Age inhabitants of the region. The shortcomings with Rao's approach are manifest beginning with its connections to the early Semitic alphabet. To claim that the Indus script is both progenitor of the Semitic alphabet and represents an Indo-Aryan language is both farfetched and ahistorical.

Perhaps the most widely accepted theories come from a group of scholars who argue that the Indus script recorded an early form of a Dravidian language, an example of which is the modern Tamil language spoken in south India. This was first suggested by Walter Fairservis, a well-known Indus valley archaeologist, and backed up by recent computer analysis of the structure of the script by Finnish and Russian scholars (Fairservis 1992; Parpola 1994). Fairservis argues that the inscriptions on seals can be read as names, titles, and/or occupations, while the animals depicted are totems indicating kin relationships, possibly clans (1992).

In the past few years a radical new theory regarding the Indus script has been causing some controversy. Steve Farmer (a historian), Richard Sproat (a computational theorist), and Michael Witzel (a linguist) have argued that the Indus is not a writing system at all (2004). Rather, it is a system of non-linguistic symbols of religious or cultural significance like the heraldic system of medieval Europe. There are several arguments against this theory. For one thing, there are over 400 signs in the Indus script, making it likely that this is a logo-syllabic script—a script that has signs for whole words and concepts as well as syllables. In addition, it has been established with some certainty that Indus writing goes from right to left and that groups of characters recur in the same sequence, all of which are characteristic of true writing systems. Moreover, computer models have shown that the randomness of symbol combinations compares best to known writing systems (R.P.N. Rao et al. 2009).

New approaches and technology have certainly improved our understanding of the script since its first discovery in the late nineteenth century. However, none of the “decipherments” of the last hundred years has gained wide acceptance, nor is there consensus on the makeup of the Indus culture. Did the Indus civilization represent a cohesive monolithic culture or a diverse multilingual society? Is there a linguistic/ethnic relationship between the Indus people and other ancient societies or today's modern Pakistanis and Indians?

Until new inscriptions turn up it is unlikely that we will be able to answer these questions.

The Oxus Civilization

Other areas of Asia also experienced rapid urbanization in the third and second millennia BCE. In the last forty years, archaeologists from the former Soviet Union have discovered a previously unknown Central Asian civilization along lower reaches of the Murghab River and the upper portions of the Oxus River, now known as Amu Darya. These regions were known to the later Greeks as Margiana and Bactria, and the Oxus civilization is therefore also known as the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (or BMAC). This region (modern Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and northern Afghanistan) sits at a crossroads between the civilizations of Iran, Mesopotamia, and the Indus to the south and Mongolia and western China to the north. The geography is one of vast deserts ringed by high snow-capped mountains. The Oxus civilization developed from Neolithic and Early Bronze Age settlements such as Jeitun, Namazga, Anau, and Altyn Tepe in the foothills of the Kopet Dagh mountains east of the Caspian Sea. These Central Asian Bronze Age cities were smaller than the major Mesopotamian and Indus cities, though comparable in size to those in other parts of the Near East. They display all of the main elements of early civilization with one major exception: they seem to lack writing. However, at Anau, archaeologists have uncovered a small piece of stone (possibly a stamp seal) engraved with four or five red symbols. The excavator, Fredrik Hiebert, believes that the symbols or signs on this object (dated c. 2300 BCE) probably represent a form of writing (Ibarguen 2001). The function and meaning of these symbols are not certain, for they do not seem to be directly derived from the signs used in early Mesopotamian, Iranian, or Indus civilization writing.

Around 2300 to 2200 BCE, the time of the suggested drought in the Near East, Altyn Tepe and the other sites in western Turkmenistan were abandoned. The population seems to have shifted eastward to the area around the Murghab and Oxus (Amu Darya) Rivers. The creation of new cities in these regions of Margiana and Bactria c. 2200 BCE marks the real advent of the Oxus civilization. This civilization's settlements arose in oases or along the riverbanks where there was sufficient water for irrigation of their fields. They were hemmed in by mountains to the south and uninhabitable deserts to the north. Nevertheless, they developed wonderful bronze, gold, and silver artifacts, as well as stone statues and monumental architecture. The cities were

protected by fortification walls, and each was dominated by a single monumental building that was also fortified. These impressive structures usually contain dozens of rooms, in a couple of cases, probably more than a hundred. Clearly, they were the most important buildings in the cities, but their nature and function is debated. They could have served as citadels during wartime, and archaeological evidence indicates that they also were storage sites for agricultural produce and workplaces for craftsmen.

Some archaeologists have interpreted the large structures as temples or palaces and argued that, like Mesopotamian cities, the Oxus civilization's settlements were ruled by religious establishments or mighty kings. Others, drawing upon Central Asian ethnographic parallels from the Iron Age and later, more persuasively see the buildings as the dwellings of rulers in a lineage-based society. Later Central Asian societies organized themselves around powerful clans or lineages, each of which had its own *khan* or ruler. One distinguished lineage always supplied the society's hereditary ruling *khan* who governed the other lineage *khans* as a first among equals. The ruling *khan*, his family, and retainers lived in a fortified structure called the *qala*. The Oxus civilization's monumental buildings resemble the Iron Age *qalas*. So, perhaps they were the residences of ruling *khans*, their extended families, servants and retainers, as well as a place for food storage and craft production (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995: 219). Because each Oxus city had a *qala*-type building, each probably had its own principal ruler. However, we cannot determine their relationships to one another. Possibly all of the city-rulers were independent, but some might have been subordinate to others, or there might have been one preeminent leader to whom all the rest were vassals. As with the other Bronze Age civilizations of Iran and the Indus, without writing we do not know what this region was called in antiquity or the ethnic composition of its inhabitants. Some scholars have suggested that the Oxus is the Shimashki or Marhashi of cuneiform texts, although these are normally identified with parts of Iran (Lamberg-Karlovsky 2013: 43). Furthermore, the excavator of Gonur Tepe, the most extensive BMAC settlement, has argued that the inhabitants of the Oxus civilizations were Indo-Iranians who had migrated from further west, although this idea has found little support (Lamberg-Karlovsky 2013: 23–24). At Gonur, Sarianidi has claimed that he has found evidence of ephedra, the narcotic plant used by Zoroastrians to make the ritual hallucinogenic drink called Haoma/Soma. He has also excavated at Gonur a “royal cemetery” where, as at Ur, human attendants were buried along with the very rich occupants (Sarianidi 2005).

Archaeologists have discovered a number of elaborate statues and figurines of women with different parts made of stone, alabaster, ivory, and lapis lazuli. They also noted that burials of women contain greater wealth than those of

males. These finds suggest that women probably had a high status in Oxus society.

Although Oxus artisans made their own square and round stamp seals of stone and metal, they also borrowed the idea of the cylinder seal from Mesopotamia. However, they carved their own animal motifs and geometric designs on them. The Oxus people do not seem to have used these seals as Mesopotamians did, as signatures on documents or to secure containers, because archaeologists have found few seal impressions. Instead, these seals might have been used by the Oxus people as personal ornaments signifying rank, status, or lineage. Another commonly found type of artifact, a never-used decorated bronze axe, also may have served as a symbol identifying its owner as having a specific rank or function.

Around 1900 BCE, people from the Oxus civilization began to move into other areas, with individuals or small groups settling in towns in southeastern Iran (Khurab, Khinaman, and Shahdad) and Pakistan (Sibri and Quetta). They have been identified by their burials in which 100 percent of the grave goods were Oxus artifacts. Excavators have also uncovered Oxus artifacts at Susa, Tepe Hissar, and Tepe Yahya in Iran, and from the last level of the Indus site of Nusharo, though there is no firm evidence of Oxus settlers at those sites. The expansionist phase of the Oxus civilization lasted only about a hundred years, for Oxus objects are not found in Iran after c. 1800 BCE. About a century later, all of the Oxus cities were abandoned and the civilization disappeared.

The Oxus civilization ended about the same time as that of the Indus valley, c. 1700 BCE. Settlements in eastern Iran were also abandoned around this time. It is likely that there is some connection between these events, but so far, scholars do not know what it is. Some have suggested that a climatic change caused a reversion to nomadism in the area, but no evidence has been found to support this idea. Another possibility is that the Oxus expansion might have produced an extensive “clash of cultures” between incompatible social and military systems. There is some evidence that the Oxus people had horses and chariots, so maybe their use of this new, seemingly invincible, weapon caused internal problems within the Iranian and Indus cultures (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995: 227). But why, then, did the Oxus civilization itself collapse? Maybe attacks by seminomads or the movements of the Indo-Iranians into the area caused the collapse of all three cultures, but there are no signs of warfare and destruction in the Oxus cities, just as there are few in the Indus valley. Hopefully, further excavation and research will suggest reasons for the mid-second millennium BCE cultural collapse in eastern Iran, Central Asia, and the Indus valley.

With the rise of research on the “peripheral areas” of the ancient Near East, what has become clear is that the spectacular florescence of Mesopotamian

civilization in third and second millennium Mesopotamia did not occur in a cultural vacuum but was paralleled in various other centers of western Asia with whom they were in contact. Roughly contemporary with the Early Dynastic and Akkadian Periods of Mesopotamia, sophisticated civilizations (albeit on a different scale in size and complexity) arose in Syria, Anatolia, Iran, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Pakistan/India. The Early Bronze Age was thus a time of international integration in which advances in one civilization spurred progress and innovation in others. This was not a one-way system in which ideas flowed from Sumer outwards. Rather, we must think of a loop in which all members contributed and benefited in different ways.

Notes

1. Most Syrian cities were between ninety-nine and 148 acres, with Mari the exception at 247 acres. On the other hand, Palestinian urban centers were less than twenty-five acres.
2. In the west, Troy and Karataş were no more than twelve to thirty-two acres, Beycesultan was larger at thirty to forty acres and central Anatolian and southeastern sites averaged between forty-nine and ninety-nine acres. The large site of Kazane Höyük at 247 acres was the largest urban site in Anatolia.
3. This fact has led some scholars to question the once commonly accepted idea that these destructions mark the entrance of the Greeks into Greece. James T. Hooker (1999: 49) has argued that since there was no widespread devastation at the end of Early Helladic III, and no evidence that any significant elements of material culture were introduced from outside, the old equation of Middle Helladic invaders with the first Greek-speakers has been completely discredited.

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Egypt to the End of the Old Kingdom

Civilization developed in Egypt almost as early as in Mesopotamia, and while Mesopotamia was establishing its basic cultural patterns in its Uruk, Jemdet Nasr, and Early Dynastic eras, Egypt was doing the same during its late Predynastic and its own Early Dynastic (or Archaic) Periods (see [Table 5.1](#)). Just after c. 2600 BCE Egyptian civilization entered one of its most flourishing and stable eras, the Old Kingdom, when art, architecture, and centralization of power reached heights seldom, if ever, matched in later Egyptian history.

The Geography of the Nile Valley

The Nile River alone makes life in Egypt possible. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus recognized this fact long ago when he made his famous statement that “Egypt is the gift of the Nile.” The Delta area gets only four to eight inches of rain a year, and the rest of the Nile valley gets far less. Thus, the river creates a long narrow oasis through terrain that otherwise would be just the eastern end of the great Sahara Desert. The Nile rises far to the south in Uganda and Ethiopia from lakes and tributaries fed by summer monsoon rains. Two main streams, the Blue Nile and the White Nile, join at Khartoum in southern Sudan to form the Nile proper. Another large tributary, the Atbara, feeds into the Nile a little further north. While the White Nile supplies most of the Nile’s flow during the winter and spring, the Blue Nile and Atbara provide most of the extra water and silt carried downstream during the flood season in summer and early fall.

Through the ages, the Nile has cut a narrow valley through the largely sandstone rock of Sudan, leaving cataracts (small waterfalls or rapids) across its path wherever it encountered more resistant types of stone. These cataracts constantly stirred up the Nile’s waters, preventing most of the silt it carried from being deposited before it reached Egypt. North of the second cataract (now under the waters of Lake Nasser since the creation of the High Dam at Aswan in the 1960s), the Nile valley widens considerably. The rock layers from

this area northward are largely limestone, which is less resistant to erosion. So, at various times in the past, the river was able to cut new channels and more easily shift its position in this northern segment. In antiquity, it was the 700-mile-long northernmost section of the Nile valley from the first cataract in the south (at Aswan) to the Mediterranean coast in the north that made up Egypt (see [Map 5.1](#)). As mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), Egypt, in turn, was divided into two parts: Upper Egypt (the long, thin portion of the Nile valley from the first cataract to the beginning of the Delta) and Lower Egypt (the Delta area north of Cairo). The portion of the valley south of the first cataract was known as Nubia or Kush (see [Map 5.1](#)).

Table 5.1 Chronology of the Egyptian Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods¹

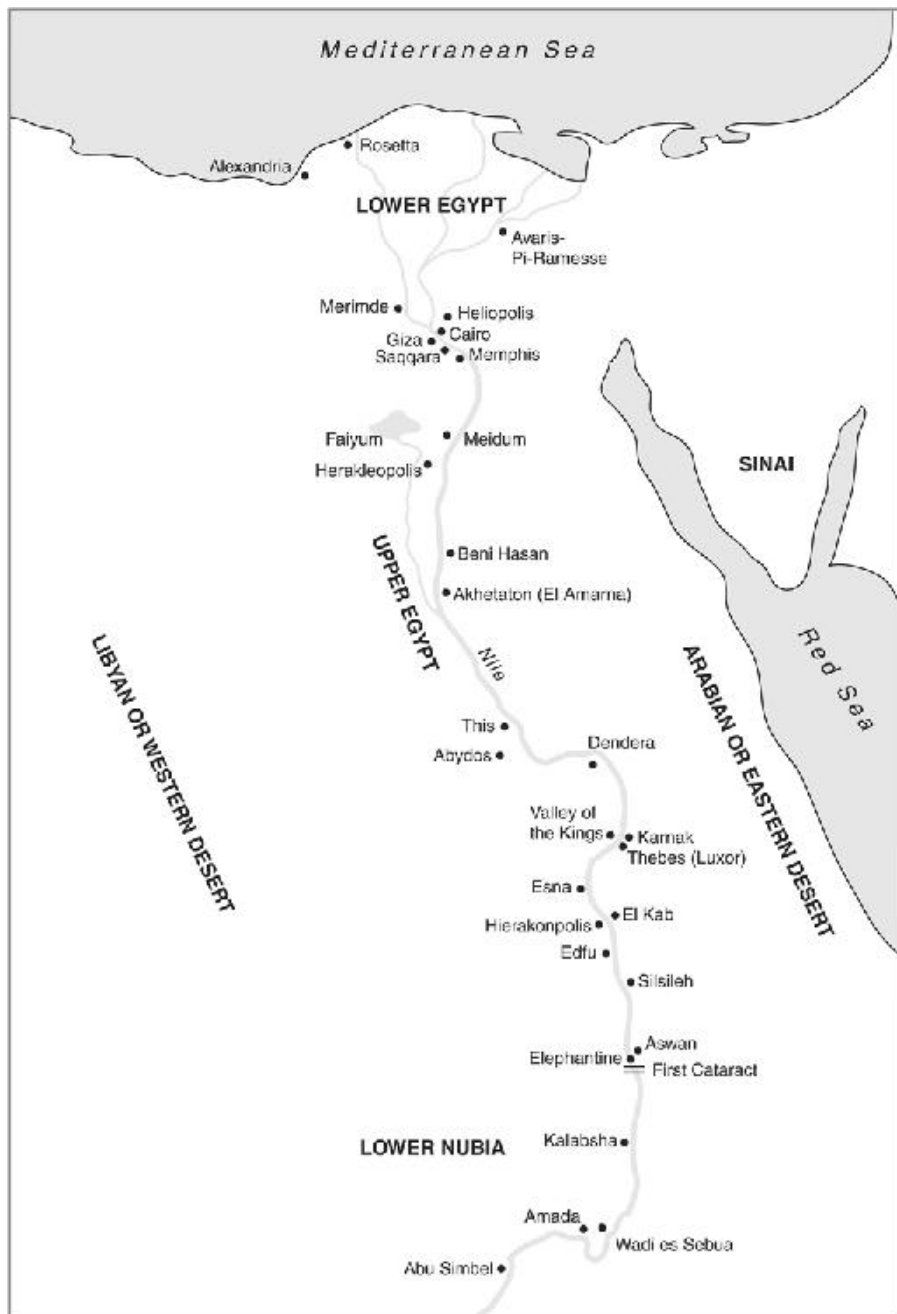
Badarian (in the South), and Merimde and Faiyum A (in the North)	5000–4000
Naqada I (= Amratian; Omari A in the North)	4000–3400
Naqada II (= Gerzian; Omari B, Maadi in the North)	3400–3050
Naqada III (The Protodynastic Era or Dynasty “0” “Scorpion” Narmer	3050–2950
The Early Dynastic (or Archaic) Period (Dynasties 1 and 2)	2950–2593
First Dynasty	2950–2732
Aha	2950–?
Second Dynasty	2730–2593
Peribsen (originally Sekhemib)	?–?
Khasekhemwy (originally Khasekhem)	2610–2593
The Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3–6)	2592–2150
Third Dynasty	2592–2543
Netjerikhet Djoser	2592–2566
Sekhemkhet	2565–2559
Khaba	2559–?
Sanakhte Nebka	?–?
Huni	?–2544
Fourth Dynasty	2543–2436
Snefru	2543–2510
Khufu (Cheops)	2509–2483

Djedefre or Redjedef	2482–2475
Khafre (Chephren)	2474–2450
Ephemeral unnamed king	2449–2448
Menkaure (Mycerinus)	2447–2442
Shepseskaf	2441–2436
Fifth Dynasty	2435–2306
Sixth Dynasty	2305–2150
Pepi II	2216–2153

All dates are BCE and are accurate only to within about +100 years for the prehistoric and Early Dynastic eras and +50 years for the Old Kingdom. Not all rulers of the First, Second, Fifth, and Sixth Dynasties are listed.

Flanking the Nile within Egypt there are two bands of fertile soil (called *kemet*, “the black land,” by the Egyptians) averaging in antiquity about one quarter mile in width on either side of the river. In Nubia, the fertile strips are much narrower. Beyond the “black land” on both sides of the Nile stretches desert, known as *deshret*, “the red land.” Within Egypt south of the Delta, the “red land” rises on either side of the river until it meets a range of mountains or hills. Beyond these hills is more desert. On the west is the vast Sahara Desert (called the Western or Libyan Desert by the Egyptians) punctuated by only a few oases. On the east, another desert (called the Eastern Desert) continues to the Red Sea and then across Sinai and Arabia.

Today, the Nile’s flow is regulated by a series of dams. However, until relatively recent times it had regular, very predictable floods (inundations). It would begin to rise about the



Map 5.1 Ancient Egypt

Adapted from Peter Clayton, *The Rediscovery of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 56.

same time every year (July). Then, at the beginning of August, the river surged through over-flow channels and covered most of the valley up to the desert

plateau. The waters remained at this high level from mid-August through September. Finally, in October, the water slowly began to subside and return to its banks, leaving behind a rich new layer of black silt. This constant renewal of the soil's fertility made Egyptian agricultural yields the highest in the ancient Near East. The Nile's cycle also led the Egyptians to divide the year into three seasons: "Inundation" (July through October), "Going Down of the Inundation" (sowing and cultivation of crops, November through February) and "Drought" (harvest and lowest levels of the Nile, March through June). Because the Egyptian civil calendar had only 365 days while the solar year is actually about 365 1/4 days long, the official seasons often did not correctly correspond to the natural ones.

Over time, the Nile's silt deposits raised the ground level near the river higher than the areas closer to the desert plateau. So, most settlements were built on these higher ridges near the river or on the edge of the desert beyond the limits of the flood. Some very low-lying basins behind the riverbanks and in parts of the Delta retained water, creating marshes and swamps. These areas supported abundant wildlife, especially waterfowl, crocodiles, and hippopotami. They also contained thickets of papyrus plants whose stalks were invaluable for making boats, mats, and other useful objects, including a paper-like writing material. The somewhat drier parts of these marshes, while still too wet for agriculture, were excellent grazing areas for cattle.

Prelude to Civilization

The Naqada II–III Period (c. 3400–3050 BCE)

The final phase of the Egyptian Predynastic era is usually known as the Naqada II (or Gerzian) Period. However, some scholars prefer to call the last century or so of this era, the time just before the unification, Naqada III (or the Protodynastic Period or Dynasty 0). As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), several different cultures existed in different parts of Egypt during the prehistoric period. By about 4000 BCE, two cultures prevailed: Omari A in Lower Egypt and Naqada I in Upper Egypt. This situation continued into the era after c. 3400 BCE when the Naqada II culture developed out of Naqada I. It was best represented in southern Egypt where Naqada and Gerza, the sites after which the period is named, are located. Although it does not give its name to this period, the most important Naqada II city in Upper Egypt was Hierakonpolis, perhaps Egypt's

first capital. The first part of Naqada II was contemporary with the Omari B and Buto-Maadi cultures of the north (named after sites in the Delta and just south of Cairo). However, the characteristic features of Naqada II gradually spread into the Nile Delta, bringing a degree of cultural uniformity to Egypt during the latter part of this era (see [Table 5.1](#)).

The skills needed to produce the beautiful flint knives, drilled and polished stone bowls, painted well-fired pottery, and other characteristic artifacts of this period indicate that experts were involved. Thus, differentiation of labor, including craft specialization, had become widespread. There is also evidence of social stratification and growing disparities in wealth. Elite members of society were able to afford stone bowls, ivory-handled flint knives, carved slate cosmetic palettes, and other luxury artifacts, while building large houses and tombs for themselves. At Hierakonpolis, the richly decorated Tomb 100 displays this social differentiation and perhaps the beginning of the concentration of power in the hands of an elite class.

Fortified settlements with rectangular mud-brick houses developed at Hierakonpolis, Naqada, Abydos, and at other places along the Nile (see [Map 5.1](#)). Gradually, these settlements seem to have been consolidated into several small principalities or kingdoms, perhaps corresponding to some of the **nomes** (administrative districts) of later Egypt. According to later tradition, by the end of the Predynastic era rulers had forged these principalities into two realms—the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt. Many archaeologists doubt whether there was ever a unified kingdom embracing all of Lower Egypt in Predynastic times. Also, although there does seem to have been a kingdom in Upper Egypt centered on Hierakonpolis, it probably did not control the entire Nile valley from the Delta to the first cataract. Although the later tradition may be oversimplified, several major kingdoms do seem to have emerged by the latter part of Naqada II. Furthermore, archaeological evidence seems to support the tradition of warfare between the rulers of Hierakonpolis and groups in the Delta.

The rapid cultural and political development that occurred during the Naqada II and III Periods may have been spurred at least in part by outside influences. Today, few (if any) scholars would support the old idea that foreign invaders (a “dynastic race”) brought civilization to Egypt and established the First Dynasty. There was continuity and development from Egypt’s earliest cultures into those of late Predynastic and Early Dynastic times. Though some new cultural features certainly appear in the Nile valley during the Naqada II Period, they probably resulted from trade rather than invasion.

There is archaeological evidence of extensive Egyptian trade with Palestine and Nubia. Palestinian pottery, especially jars with wavy ledge handles, became widespread in Egypt. Archaeologists also have uncovered Egyptian

objects from this era at Palestinian sites. Though few Nubian objects have been found in Egypt, Egyptian pottery vessels are commonplace in Nubia. The trade goods coming from Nubia must have been primarily raw materials, as in later times—ivory, gold, copper, animal skins, precious stones, ebony, and other fine woods.

However, it was trade with Mesopotamia that seems to have had the greatest cultural impact on Egypt at this time. Archaeologists have not found Egyptian artifacts from this era in Mesopotamia, but they have uncovered Mesopotamian Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr cylinder seals and pottery vessels in Egypt. This suggests that either, like Nubia, the Egyptians were trading raw materials or, more likely, that the Mesopotamian goods were coming to Egypt through intermediaries in Syria or Palestine. As noted in [Chapter 2](#), archaeologists have found both Egyptian Naqada II and Mesopotamian Late Uruk objects at Habuba Kabira in Syria. So, it was probably at this site and at similar ones in Syria and Palestine that the two cultures were meeting. By whatever means they came to the Nile valley, the Mesopotamian wares and ideas seem to have strongly influenced Egyptian culture. Egyptian palace and royal tomb façades from this time and the following Early Dynastic Period have numerous niches or inset-offset panels like those of Mesopotamian temples. Egyptians began copying the Mesopotamian practice of using cylinder seals to make impressions in clay to indicate ownership. Also, several Mesopotamian-like artistic motifs appear on Egyptian artifacts. These include a bearded “hero” holding animals at bay on either side, a lion attacking the hindquarters of its prey, Mesopotamian-style boats, entwined snakes, and creatures with long wavy or intertwined necks. Some think that Mesopotamians may have taught the Egyptians more advanced techniques for carving stone vessels and working copper. More significant, though, is the probability that contact between Mesopotamia and Egypt contributed to the development of writing in both areas.

The Formation of the Egyptian State (c. 3050–2593 BCE)

Debating the Evidence: The Process of Unification

Sometime between c. 3050 and 2950 BCE, during the Naqada III or Protodynastic Period, a ruler of Upper Egypt supposedly conquered Lower

Egypt and unified the Two Lands. This event supposedly marked the beginning of the Dynastic era. Later Egyptian tradition as preserved by an Egyptian priest named Manetho and various Greek writers credited this unification to a king called Menes. Supposedly, Menes not only made himself ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt, but also founded Memphis. Nineteenth Dynasty king lists also name the first king of Egypt Meni. However, scholars do not agree on which historical figure known from artifacts or texts might be this Menes.

The Palermo Stone, a Fifth Dynasty list of early Egyptian rulers, does not mention Menes or Meni. Instead, it lists someone named Aha (or Hor-Aha) as the first king of the First Dynasty. However, Aha follows Meni (Menes) on the Turin Canon, a king list written around 1200 BCE. Moreover, the Turin Canon lists Meni twice in succession, once designated as a human ruler and once designated as a god. To complicate matters, archaeologists have found objects that suggest two other candidates for the title of “first king” or “unifier” of Egypt.

One of these artifacts is known as the Scorpion Macehead. It is the carved stone head of a ceremonial or votive mace found at Hierakonpolis. The scene depicted on it shows a ruler wearing the “White Crown,” the traditional crown of Upper Egypt, performing some ceremonial act with a hoe. Possibly he is opening an irrigation canal or beginning temple construction. He is identified by two symbols in front of his face, a rosette and a scorpion. We do not know how these signs are to be read, so he is conventionally called King Scorpion (or Rosette-Scorpion). Clumps of papyrus plants seem to indicate that this action is taking place in the Delta. Around the top of the macehead, lapwing birds are hanging from standards bearing symbols of some of Upper Egypt’s later nomes or provinces. The lapwing in later writing was the hieroglyph for “common people.” This would seem to indicate that Scorpion, a king of Upper Egypt, had conquered at least part of Lower Egypt and was performing acts of kingship and administration there.

A slightly later cosmetic palette from Hierakonpolis also apparently depicts a king of Upper Egypt conquering Lower Egypt. However, on this object, the king is named Narmer, his name written with signs that remained part of the hieroglyphic writing system of later times. On one side of the palette, Narmer, wearing the “White Crown” of Upper Egypt, is brandishing a mace to give the death blow to a kneeling captive (see [Figure 5.1a](#)). Above the prisoner’s head, a falcon is holding captive a human-headed papyrus clump. This symbol seems to represent the king, the human incarnation of Hierakonpolis’s falcon-god Horus, as conqueror of the Delta region (represented by the papyrus plants). The other side of the palette shows Narmer wearing the “Red Crown” traditionally associated with Lower Egypt (see [Figure 5.1b](#)). He is surveying the battlefield where the enemy dead are laid out in rows. Two beasts with

their necks entwined seem to symbolize the unification of the Two Lands. Narmer also wears the “Red Crown” on a carved ceremonial macehead from Hierakonpolis. Thus, Narmer appears to have been a king of Upper Egypt who defeated the occupants of the Delta and became king of Lower Egypt as well.

However, this interpretation of the palette is not as certain as it seems. A Naqada I jar (c. 4000–3500 BCE) from Upper Egypt depicts the “Red Crown” (Kemp 1995: 681). Both crowns seem to have originated in Upper Egypt, and the “Red Crown” probably was designated as the symbolic crown of the North only after the unification (Wilkinson 2013: 31). Thus, Narmer’s use of the “Red Crown” does not necessarily show that he claimed to be King of Lower Egypt. We cannot even be sure he won a victory in the Delta. One scholar has argued that the palette depicts a ritual re-enactment of an earlier victory over a Libyan group rather than an historical battle from Narmer’s reign (Schulman 1991–1992; Spencer 1993: 55–57). However, a recently discovered label from Narmer’s reign mentions the “smiting” of a land symbolized by papyrus plants. This label supports the traditional interpretation of the palette as celebrating Narmer’s conquest of Lower Egypt.



Figure 5.1 The Narmer Palette

Left: view of front; right: view of back.

© Walter Foreman/Art Resource, New York.

Aha, the first king of the First Dynasty according to Old Kingdom sources, also may have conducted military campaigns in the Delta. His name means “warrior.” Also, Aha is the earliest king attested at Memphis, a city that he

seems to have established. As the founding of Memphis was later ascribed to Menes, Aha and Menes may be the same person. Moreover, an ivory label depicts Aha before a structure inscribed “Two Ladies *Men*” (Murnane 1997: 23). In later times, rulers’ royal titles consisted of five names, the first called the Horus name and the second called the *nebtj* name (the “Two Ladies” name, referring to the patron goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt). Thus, the label may indicate that Men or Meni (Menes in Greek) was the *nebtj* name of the king whose Horus name was Aha. On the other hand, this interpretation of the label’s meaning is not certain. Some scholars think the building depicted is a funerary shrine that Aha is dedicating to his predecessor, Menes (probably Narmer). The Egyptian word *men* means “to endure” or “the enduring one.” Thus, it is also possible that the shrine was dedicated to worship of the two patron goddesses and named “The Two Ladies Endure” (Kinnaer 2003).

So who was Menes? Scorpion? Narmer? Aha? Or perhaps Menes was another king even earlier than these three. Scholars disagree. Some have argued that two or more of these kings are the same person known by different names (e.g., Malek 1986: 29). Another suggestion is that Menes is a later historical construct possibly based on an erroneous reading of an early text, because Egyptian *men-i* can mean “So-and-so who once came” (Malek 1986: 29; Murnane 1997: 23). Most think it likely that the Menes known to later tradition was either Narmer or Aha (Kinnaer 2001; 2003). Obviously, though, the tradition of a single conquest and unification by one king is greatly oversimplified.

Some scholars argue that Upper and Lower Egypt had gradually achieved a cultural and political unity during the Naqada II Period and that there was no need for a conquest (e.g., Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 1, 132–134). Also, a recently excavated tomb at Abydos, Tomb U-j, may show that the processes of unification had already begun by 3200 BCE. This special tomb, large and rich, included tags of objects naming Delta regions. These suggest that Upper Egyptian kings even prior to King Narmer had some control over the north. However, the Scorpion Macehead and Narmer Palette seem to commemorate two different Upper Egyptian campaigns or “conquests” in the Delta, though this area was probably not a unified kingdom. Furthermore, there may have been other military campaigns against areas of the Delta before those of Scorpion and Narmer. Remarkably, there is no archaeological evidence of violence or conquest in the Delta during this period. Based on serekhs (the royal name depicted in a niched box) and seal impressions the names of several predecessors of Narmer have been identified (Iry-Hor, Ka, and Scorpion (?)). The process of unification must have taken generations before it became an accepted fact of life. Perhaps the later tradition telescoped the complex developments that led to the establishment of a unified Egyptian state,

crediting the accomplishments of three or more kings to Menes alone.

However complicated the unification process may have been, it almost certainly was completed by the reign of Aha, the first king of Egypt's Dynasty 1. The various parts of Egypt had been welded into a single nation-state—the first known to history. Fictional or not, the idea of two kingdoms, Upper and Lower Egypt, united by and through one king became a basic element of Egyptian civilization. It was constantly depicted in artistic motifs, religious rituals, and royal titles. Egypt, unified in the person of its ruler, was ready to begin its 3,000 years of pharaonic civilization.

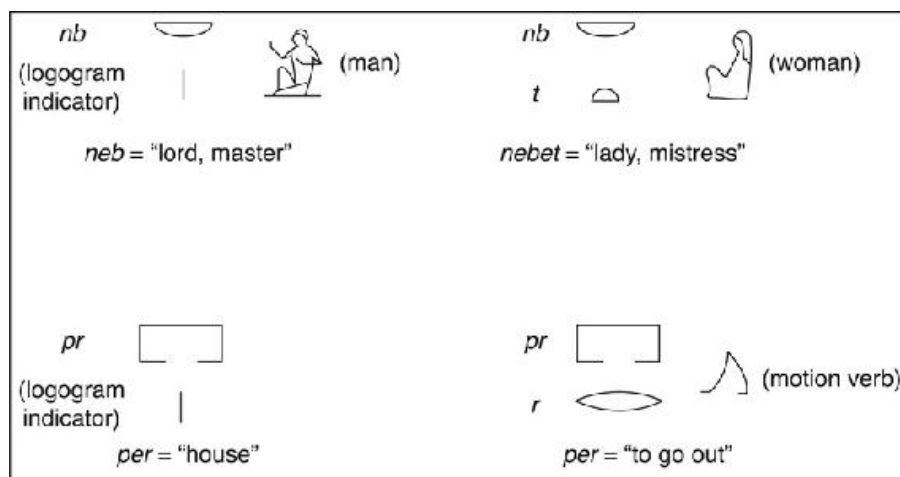
The Development of Egyptian Writing

The primary writing system developed by the ancient Egyptians is known as hieroglyphic writing. This name comes from the ancient Greeks who called it *hieroglyphikà grámmata*, “sacred carved letters.” Because they saw hieroglyphs primarily on temple walls, tombs, stelae, and other religious objects, Greek travelers may have gotten the false impression that Egyptians used them only for religious purposes. However, it is also possible that the Greek term reflected the native Egyptian expression for writing: *medu netjer*, “divine words.”

The fully developed hieroglyphic writing system first appeared at about the same time as the unification. However, crude logograms representing concepts, objects, or actions had been used somewhat earlier. At Abydos, German archaeologists have unearthed bone and ivory labels, pottery, and clay seal impressions bearing hieroglyphs. These artifacts, dated by the excavators between 3400 and 3200 BCE, exhibited written signs indicating the quantity and place of origin of various trade commodities. However, these glyphs were not all logograms. Many were phonetic signs that utilized the principle of rebus writing (Mitchell 1999; Bard 2000: 64). Rebus puzzles consist of words or phrases written with letters, numerals, or pictures whose names have the same sounds as the words to be read. For example, in English we might write “belief” with drawings of a bee and a leaf. The Abydos hieroglyphs may represent the earliest phonetic writing found so far and seem to be precursors of the more complex system of the Dynastic Age. However, some Egyptologists question the early dates given to the Abydos labels, preferring to date them c. 3000 BCE (e.g., Wilkinson 2013: 41).

Around the time of Narmer and Aha scribes began using a mixture of logograms, phonetic signs, and determinatives to clarify the meaning of inscriptions. Some words with the same sound had different meanings, and

there were many signs that sometimes could be used to represent complete words and at other times, only sounds (see [Figure 5.2](#)). Therefore, scribes began adding determinatives to many words. These signs were symbols or logograms designed to remove any possible ambiguity in the meaning of the written signs. For example, a straight vertical line under a sign indicated that it was to be read as a logogram for a word, not just as a sound. Or, a drawing of a seated man could be placed behind a sign such as *neb* (“lord”) to show that the masculine form of the word was intended. On the other hand, the sign for *neb* followed by the phonetic sign for “t” and a seated woman would be read *nebet* (“lady; mistress”). Small running legs would be written behind verbs that describe motion, and so forth (see [Figure 5.2](#)).



[Figure 5.2](#) Examples of Egyptian Hieroglyphic Writing

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

As in later Hebrew and Arabic, only consonants were written. Thus, because vowels were not represented, we have only a vague idea of how ancient Egyptian words were actually pronounced. This is why scholars spell Egyptian words and names in diverse ways. Also, although Egyptian hieroglyphic writing contained twenty-four signs that represented only one consonant each, they never developed these signs into a true alphabet. They continued to use a mixture of logograms, biconsonantal and triconsonantal phonetic signs, determinatives, and single-consonant “alphabetic” signs. Eventually, Egyptian scribes created a cursive version of the hieroglyphic signs known as hieratic and a still-later version known as demotic for everyday use on papyrus. Nevertheless, they continued to use elaborate hieroglyphs for important inscriptions until the end of the fourth century CE.

In the past, many scholars argued that writing was a Mesopotamian gift to

Egypt. The Mesopotamian use of signs for words and ideas may have inspired the Egyptians to develop their own writing system (Wilkinson 2013: 41). On the other hand, though the Late Uruk tablets are earlier than the Abydos plaques, if the early dates for the Abydos material are substantiated, Egyptian phonetic writing would be earlier than that of Mesopotamia. Whoever invented true writing first, it appears that contact between these two areas led to “cross-fertilization” and to the appearance of complex writing systems in both regions at about the same time. It is clear, though, that only *ideas* about writing were being exchanged. The Egyptians created their own hieroglyphic symbols, which were quite different from the cuneiform signs developed by the Mesopotamians.

The Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1 and 2, c. 2950–2593 BCE)

The era of the first two Egyptian Dynasties is usually called the Early Dynastic or Archaic Period. It is also sometimes called the Thinite Period because, according to Manetho, the capital of Egypt during the first two dynasties was at This (or Thinis), a town very close to Abydos (see [Map 5.1](#)). The movement of the capital from Hierakonpolis to This (Thinis) may reflect the new prominence of Abydos’s chief god, Khentiamentiu (“Foremost of the Westerners”). By about 2450 BCE, this god, the ruler of the blessed dead, was identified with **Osiris**, and his name became one of Osiris’s titles (O’Connor 2009: 31). Such merging of deities and blending of myths, a feature of later Egyptian religion, was probably already underway in the Early Dynastic Period.

During this era, rulers strengthened and consolidated the union created by Aha and his predecessors. They began developing the administrative system that would become so effective during the Old Kingdom. They divided Egypt into administrative districts called nomes, twenty-two in Upper Egypt and twenty in Lower Egypt. An official called a nomarch governed each nome. While the capital remained in the south, Memphis became the center from which powerful officials controlled the newly incorporated Delta region. The regional differences apparent during the Predynastic era became minimal, and Egyptian culture became relatively homogeneous once Egypt had only one king and one ruling class.

On the other hand, the Egyptian and Nubian cultures, which had been at comparable levels during the Predynastic Period, began to diverge considerably around the time of Egypt’s unification. While predynastic

kingdoms were being formed in Upper Egypt, Nubia seems to have been experiencing a similar development with small kingdoms centered on Qustul and Seyala. However, as soon as the Upper Egyptian kingdoms were unified under one rule, the early kings moved to eliminate any possible rivalry from Nubia. Two inscriptions on rocks near Gebel Sheikh Suleiman depict pre-First Dynasty Egyptian military victories in Nubia. One shows a large scorpion whose pincers hold a rope binding a Nubian chieftain, while the other depicts the hieroglyphic marker for an Egyptian king in front of a field of dead Nubians (Wilkinson 2013: 28, 43). As the Egyptians developed their own identity, all outsiders, including the Nubians, became foreigners and enemies.

Our earliest reference to an Egyptian military campaign into western Asia comes from the First Dynasty. One of the regnal years of King Djer, successor to Aha, is named “The Year of Smiting the Land of Setjet” (Syria-Palestine). Despite (or perhaps because of) such raids, trade with Palestine continued, and even increased somewhat from its earlier levels. Djer also conducted campaigns in Nubia and against the Libyans to the west. In addition, the kings of the first two dynasties sent expeditions into Sinai where they began acquiring turquoise and copper from the natives.

Another interesting development during the First Dynasty was the reign of a woman, Meritneith. She does not seem to have claimed the titles and prerogatives of kings, for an early list of rulers on a clay seal impression designates her only as “King’s Mother.” After the death of her husband, she probably acted as regent for her infant son (probably King Den). However, she did exercise royal power for several years and was buried in a tomb indistinguishable from those of Early Dynastic kings.

Early Dynastic rulers customarily inscribed their names within rectangles (called *serekhs*) depicting the royal palace surmounted by the image of a falcon (almost certainly the solar/sky god Horus). In this way, they were probably claiming to be the incarnation of Horus. Just before the end of the Second Dynasty there may have been some conflict, possibly even civil war, between different areas of Egypt. Lower Egypt seems to have broken away from the pharaoh’s control (Wilkinson 2013: 49–50). There also may have been conflict between worshippers of competing deities. The Horus Sekhemib (“Powerful in Heart”) apparently changed his name during his reign to honor Seth (a desert deity who came to represent the forces of disturbance and confusion) rather than Horus. He put the Seth animal (possibly a dog) over his name in place of the falcon and became the Seth Peribsen (“Hope of all Hearts” or “Who Goes Forth from Their Hearts”). Seth was later regarded as the mortal enemy of Horus (see the section on divine kingship following), so some scholars argue that this name change suggests disputes between followers of Horus and Seth or between parts of Egypt represented by Horus and Seth (e.g., Clayton 1994:

27–28). If there was conflict or war at this time, Peribsen’s successor probably ended it. Originally named the Horus Khasekhem (“The Powerful One [Horus] Appears”), he changed this Horus name to Khasekhemwy (“The Two Powerful Ones Appear”) and placed both the Horus falcon and Seth animal above it. In addition, he added a second name, “The Two Lords Are at Peace in Him.”

The Early Dynastic era was a period of experimentation and amazing creativity. It saw the emergence or standardization of most of the basic political and cultural elements that would remain characteristic of ancient Egyptian civilization throughout its history. Many Old Kingdom developments (such as the construction of the pyramids) cannot be understood adequately without reference to these fundamental concepts. So, we will briefly examine some of them before proceeding to a discussion of the Old Kingdom.

Some Basic Elements of Egyptian Belief

Ma‘at

The concept of *ma‘at* is basic to ancient Egyptian thought. This term cannot really be translated by a single English word, though its meaning is often given as “truth.” However, it meant much more. *Ma ‘at* was also order, stability, balance, harmony, wisdom, and justice. It was the state in which everything was in its right place; everything was in order, just as the gods had made it. *Ma ‘at* was personified as a goddess, the daughter of the sun god Re. She was represented either by the image of a woman with a feather in her headband (see [Figure 5.3](#)) or just by the feather, her special symbol. One of the basic duties of the great divinities and their divine representative on earth, the king, was to maintain *ma ‘at* in nature and in society.

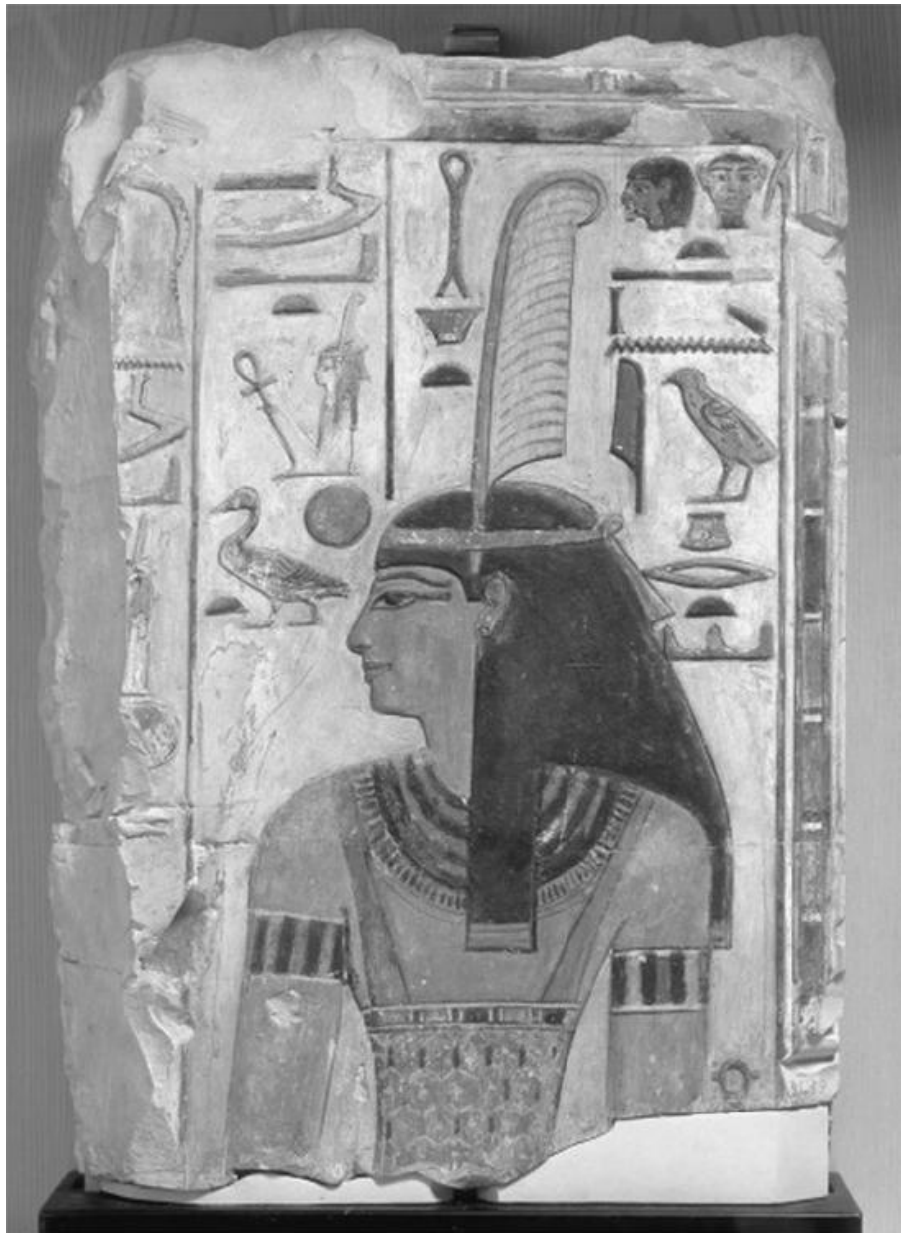


Figure 5.3 The Goddess Ma'at

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The Egyptian belief in *ma'at* probably was encouraged in part by Egypt's physical environment. The Nile valley had an order, harmony, and stability not found in other areas of the Near East. One side of the valley often reflects the other. The "black land" on either side of the river and throughout much of the Delta provided the Egyptians with their food. Yet the hills and dry desert

plateaus were also useful. The hills provided semiprecious stones and some gold. Their main contribution, however, was the building stone that the Egyptians eventually used for stelae, statues, tombs, and temples. The desert areas just beyond the reach of the Nile's inundations were where Egyptians often built their villages. They also buried their dead in the desert, at first in graves and tombs near the villages and towns, and later in tombs cut into the hillsides a bit further away. So, the Egyptians recognized a harmonious relationship between the "black land" and "red land" similar to the beneficial union created between the other Two Lands, Upper and Lower Egypt.

The Egyptians lived in a world of order and stability. The Nile's predictable inundations were beneficial and thought to be created by the gods for Egypt's benefit. In addition, the ruler cut canals to better harness its flows. The Egyptians also measured the Nile's flow with Nilometers, usually rock cut steps with carved measuring marks. The Egyptians used them to determine exactly when each inundation began as well as to estimate how high it would be and when it would reach various points in Egypt. Thus, people came to view the inundations as even more regular and predictable. Similarly, the cycle of the sun crossing the sky from the hills in the east to the hills in the west led to the idea that the sun circled under the earth during the night. This unchanging orderly cycle formed the basis for some of Egypt's most important myths and theological concepts.

Nature gave Egypt a large measure of protection from external invasion. The large deserts beyond the eastern and western hills were too vast and harsh to harbor inhabitants or allow the passage of enemies. So, Egypt did not have to fear invasions from either side, and access points in the north and south could be controlled when Egypt was strong. Consequently, the Egyptian worldview saw the gods as benevolent and good and believed *ma'at*, the order and stability established by the gods, would ultimately prevail over the demons and evil spirits that caused bad things to happen in this world.

Divine Kingship

As we noted previously, Mesopotamians believed that their rulers were intermediaries between the gods and humans. However, with a few exceptions, Mesopotamian kings usually were not considered divine; they were only the viceroys or earthly representatives of the gods. In Egypt, though, the king was himself a god, ruling the country for his fellow deities. He was the real owner of all its land, people, and resources.

The belief that the king was divine probably goes back to the very beginning

of king-ship in Egypt. Predynastic depictions of rulers such as “Scorpion” and Narmer (see [Figure 5.1](#)) already show them much larger than the ordinary people around them. Similar illustrations from this time found in Nubia indicate that rulers there probably also were considered divine. It is now impossible to determine how and where this idea originated. Many scholars now regard it as a fairly universal concept that appeared independently in slightly different forms in many different areas. Others argue that it was a common African belief that came into Egypt in prehistoric times. However and wherever it arose, belief that the king was in some way divine remained a dominant concept in Egypt throughout antiquity.

The ancient Egyptians did not actually have a word that directly corresponds to our term “king.” For example, the title *nisut bity*, which we, for convenience, translate as “King of Upper and Lower Egypt,” is literally “He of the Sedge Plant and the Bee.” (The sedge was a symbol of Upper Egypt and the bee represented Lower Egypt.) The word “pharaoh,” which we commonly use for Egyptian rulers, is derived from the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew term was an attempt to reproduce the Egyptian word *per ‘o* (or *per ‘aa*), which meant “great house.” This word was originally one of several terms for the royal palace, but from the Eighteenth Dynasty on, it came to be used to refer to the king himself. Modern historians follow the biblical usage, applying it to all kings of Egypt, even though this term is anachronistic for pre-Eighteenth Dynasty rulers.

From the Old Kingdom onward, Egyptians commonly called the king “the good god,” and myths indicated his divine status. According to one story, Osiris had once been ruler of Egypt. However, his wicked brother Seth killed and then dismembered him. Osiris’s wife (and sister) **Isis** carefully collected the scattered pieces of his body and formed them into a mummy. She and her sister Nephthys then used magic to restore Osiris to life, but he now became ruler of the afterlife rather than this world. Isis bore Osiris a son named Horus (see [Figure 5.4](#)) who avenged his father by defeating Seth and becoming the new king of Egypt (O’Connor 2009: 31–41). Thus, every king of Egypt was the earthly embodiment of Horus. He overcame Seth (evil, disorder, and chaos) and preserved *ma ‘at*. When he died, he became Osiris and his son ruled as the new Horus.



Figure 5.4 A Major Triad of Deities

Left to Right: Horus, Osiris, and Isis.

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Probably as early as the late Predynastic era, Egyptians believed the ruler to be the earthly embodiment of a god (usually Horus), as they did in later times. The Narmer Palette depicts the king in the form of a falcon, the symbolic representation of Horus. Also, Early Dynastic rulers placed the image of a falcon above their names, suggesting that they were claiming to be Horus incarnate. Furthermore, the First Dynasty royal burial ground at Abydos would later be a cult place for the god Osiris. As mentioned earlier, a Second Dynasty king changed the falcon above his name to a Seth symbol. This suggests not only that both gods were worshipped at this time, but also that

the whole Osiris-Seth-Horus conflict myth was already known.

Many of the images and titles associated with the divinity of the king in later times were already present in the Predynastic era. The Narmer Palette also shows a bull demolishing a walled city (see [Figure 5.1b](#)). This is probably a symbolic representation of Narmer as the “Mighty Bull,” another of the later royal titles. In addition, “Scorpion” and Narmer, like later kings, wear a bull’s tail hanging from the back of their belts, a further indication of their role as embodiment of the divine bull. These rulers also wear a special beard worn only by gods, and their crowns bear the **uraeus**, a protective image of a rearing cobra thought to spit fire at enemies of the king.

By the Fifth Dynasty Egyptian rulers came to have a royal titulary of five different names that signified their divine status. In later times, the fourth and fifth of these names, called the praenomen (or throne name, the name the king adopted at the beginning of his reign) and nomen (or personal name, the name the king was given at birth) were enclosed in ovals labeled cartouches. These two names were used to designate the king when the entire list of names was not given. The praenomen was preceded by the title *nisut bity*, “King of Upper and Lower Egypt.” The *nisut bity* name or praenomen appeared for the first time near the end of the First Dynasty. In later times when a text or inscription referred to a pharaoh by only one name, it was usually the praenomen that was used.

Because of belief in the divine nature of kingship, the Egyptians do not seem to have created law codes like those of the Mesopotamians, Hittites, and Israelites. As a god, pharaoh’s word was law. However, he would not have felt able to do anything he pleased. He was expected to uphold *ma ‘at*. His legal decisions and those of his officials seem to have followed traditional concepts of personal rights, fairness, and justice designed to maintain the status quo. This created a sort of common law system for Egypt.

It seems likely that the Egyptians, at least those in the upper classes, distinguished between the human being who was ruler at any given time and the eternal office of kingship that he exercised (Silverman 1991: 67). This distinction was expressed by the concept of the divine **ka** possessed by every Egyptian king. Every person was thought to have a *ka*, a vital force that animated his or her body. The *ka* of the king, however, was divine (L. Bell 1997: 140). In fact, artistic representations of the upraised arms (symbolizing the *ka*) with the Horus name of the king between them seem to indicate that Horus himself was the *ka* of the king. Furthermore, Isis, the mother of Horus, originally seems to have been the deified throne of Egypt (Frankfort 1948: 43). During the coronation ceremony for a new king, the mortal taking the throne received the divine *ka* of kingship and became Horus, the divine son of Isis and Osiris, by virtue of his office. In the words of Thomas Schneider (1998:

323), “the individual, temporal person of the ruler and the transcending, idealized being from the ideology were united within him.” (See also O’Connor and Silverman editors 1995; Leprohon 1995: 274–275; and Silverman 1997a: 112–113.)

To the Egyptians, the divine king was “a bond between nature and man” (Frankfort 1948: 47). Because the occupant of Egypt’s throne embodied the divine *ka*, he naturally would rule in accordance with *ma ‘at*. He would also conduct the religious rites necessary to maintain *ma ‘at* and keep the forces of chaos at bay. As Stephen Quirke has pointed out (1992: 81), “all cult in Egypt was royal cult; it was part of a cosmic pact in which the king offered up to heaven the fruits of the earth, in exchange channelling down to earth the blessings of heaven.” Thus, the divine king assured the continued well-being of the land and its people. He was the necessary link between society and nature, and between the people and their other gods.

Burial and the Afterlife

Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife seem to have been developed by the Naqada II Period, if not earlier. In the Naqada I era (c. 4000–3500 BCE) the peoples of both Upper and Lower Egypt buried their dead in simple graves, each containing only a few pots or other small objects in addition to a body. Most of the bodies had been placed on their sides in a fetal position as if they were sleeping (or perhaps as if they were in the womb awaiting a second birth). Generally, their faces were turned to the west, the later Egyptian land of the dead, but no attempts had been made to preserve the bodies. Nevertheless, because the cemeteries in Upper Egypt were in the desert, the hot dry sand often desiccated the tissues, producing natural mummies. However, we cannot determine whether these Predynastic Egyptians held beliefs about the afterlife similar to those of later times.

During the Naqada II Period (c. 3500–2950 BCE), members of the growing elite began to bury their dead with large numbers of grave offerings reflecting their wealth and social position. The articles buried with the dead are mostly objects that would have been used in everyday life. The mud-brick tombs were much larger than before, and the walls were sometimes decorated with paintings. The bodies were usually carefully placed on or wrapped in reed mats and surrounded by their possessions. The similarities between these tombs and those of later times suggest that the Egyptians already believed in an afterlife that would be principally like this one.

This era also saw the beginning of intentional mummification. Perhaps

accidental discoveries of well-preserved earlier remains led to the first deliberate attempts to preserve the bodies of the dead. Later Egyptians believed that a person's spiritual elements needed the body to survive. Maybe in the Naqada II era people began to reason that if they could make the body last forever, they could also assure the survival of other aspects of a person. For a long time Egyptologists believed that mummification had not been attempted before the Early Dynastic Period. However, since 1997, excavators have been uncovering a Naqada II cemetery at Hierakonpolis filled with mummies. It is not yet known whether natron, a natural salt found near Cairo, had been used to dry out the bodies. There is also no evidence of attempts to remove the internal organs as was done in later times. However, the embalmers had inserted linen pads in places to flesh out the bodies and make them look more lifelike. Then they applied resin to the bodies, wrapped them in linen bandages, and applied more resin before encasing them in linen shrouds (Ikram and Dodson 1998: 109).

Gradually, the mummification process became more complex. By the Old Kingdom Period at the latest, the Egyptians had discovered that natron absorbed moisture. Thus, it could dry out bodies in the way the hot desert sands had in early times. Natron is also mildly antiseptic, a quality that helped it ward off putrefaction. From the late Old Kingdom on, embalmers would wash a corpse with a natron solution, then remove its internal organs. However, the heart, to Egyptians the seat of reason, will, and emotion, they left in place. They rinsed the abdomen and chest cavity with spices and palm wine and packed them with rags, straw, or other temporary stuffing. They then covered the body and internal organs with heaps of dry natron for a time (40 days in later eras). At the end of this period, the internal organs were dressed with scented oil and resin, wrapped in linen, and placed in special jars for burial with the body. The embalmers washed and dried the body itself, stuffed it again with resin-soaked linen or sawdust, rubbed it with a lotion containing oils, beeswax, spices, and natron, then covered it with a thin layer of molten resin. This process toughened the skin and made it waterproof. They then wrapped the body, concealing many amulets and bits of jewelry between the layers of bandages. Finally, they covered the whole body with one or more shrouds bound in place by linen strips, placed it in a coffin, and returned it to relatives for burial. In New Kingdom and later periods, this entire mummification process usually took seventy days.

Ancient Egyptians thought that a person consisted of many elements, including a name and a shadow, in addition to a body. The most important spiritual element was the *ka*. The word is often translated as "spirit" or "soul," but "life-force" would probably be better. The *ka* was a person's spiritual double, created by the gods at the same time as his or her body. It provided

animation and vitality to the body. The *ka* needed its body to survive; it also needed food. Thus, the Egyptians tried to preserve the body so it could continue to serve as an abode for the *ka*. They also provided food offerings (both real and representational) so the *ka* could be sustained in the afterlife.

Other spiritual entities known from the Old Kingdom onward are the *ba* and the *akh*. We cannot be sure that Early Dynastic Egyptians believed in these two spiritual beings, for we have few texts from this time. However, the *ba* and *akh* are mentioned in the later Pyramid Texts, a series of very old hymns, rituals, incantations, and fragments of myths that probably go back to Early Dynastic, if not Predynastic, times. As in Old Kingdom times, Early Dynastic Egyptians probably believed that only the king and other gods possessed a *ba* and became an *akh*.

The *ba* (often translated “soul”) was that element within kings and gods that allowed them to express their personalities, presence, and power within the world. The *ba* could move about the world freely and invisibly, visiting its favorite places. It did, however, have to return to the tomb at night, and like the *ka*, it could not survive if the body did not survive. In later times it was represented as a human-headed bird, symbolizing both the *ba*’s connection with human personality and its freedom of motion.

Because the king was a god, when he died, he naturally would join the other gods to live and rule eternally. However, first his earthly being had to be transformed into an *akh*, a “glorified being of light.” Every day, the sun god entered the western *akhet* (usually rendered “horizon”). The western *akhet* was not just the place where the sky appears to meet the earth, however. It was the home of light, the region between this world and the underworld, and the place where the sun god was transfigured into an *akh*. As a glorified and effective spirit he traversed the underworld until he reached the eastern *akhet*. There he was transformed once again for his journey across the daytime sky. So, too, the dead king would become an *akh*, joining the gods and participating in their eternal activities.

The mud-brick tombs constructed for Early Dynastic (Naqada III) kings, queens, and their high officials were even larger and more elaborate than those of the Naqada II era. These rectangular tombs, called *mastabas*, usually had paneled (inset-offset) façades like the structures (thought to represent royal palaces) depicted beneath Early Dynastic kings’ names. In addition to a shaft leading down to a burial chamber under it, each *mastaba* also had several rooms for storing burial objects. Thus, the *mastaba* was likely conceived as a “house for eternity,” as were later tombs.

Like their Predynastic predecessors, Early Dynastic Egyptians placed within tombs many objects used in everyday life as well as some having only religious or ritual significance. Presumably, through magic, the dead could use

these objects in an afterlife that was to be much like this one. This practice of burying objects with the dead, including jewelry and articles made of gold and other precious materials, led some individuals to engage in tomb robbing. There is evidence that even during Predynastic times, thieves had looted many graves and tombs. Despite all attempts to prevent it, this nefarious activity continued throughout Egyptian history, especially flourishing during times of internal strife and chaos.

First and Second Dynasty rulers not only tried to take much of their wealth with them to the other world, but also their servants. Around the royal tombs of this era at Abydos there are rows of subsidiary graves for attendants who were buried with the monarch they had served. That these individuals were sacrificed is indicated by the fact that most were in the prime of life when they died (averaging about twenty-five years of age). Also, recent study of some of the subsidiary graves revealed that the bodies they contained showed signs of death by strangulation (Wilkinson 2013: 37–38). During this time, even some of the powerful officials buried at Saqqara near Memphis had servant burials associated with their tombs. This custom reached its height during the First Dynasty when more than 300 retainers were killed and buried with King Djer. In succeeding reigns, the number of servant burials gradually diminished, and this practice of human sacrifice ceased at the end of the Second Dynasty.

The Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3–6, c. 2592–2150 BCE)

Djoser and the First Pyramid

The Third Dynasty begins an era known as the Old Kingdom (see [Table 5.1](#)). Building upon the foundations laid during the Early Dynastic Period, this almost 450-year-long period would see Egypt attain unprecedented affluence, stability, and power. This era is also known as the “Pyramid Age” after its most characteristic constructions. This is fitting, for as we shall see, changes in pyramid size and construction methods parallel the growth, apogee, and decline of royal power, centralization, and general prosperity.

When Djoser (c. 2592–2566 BCE), the first king of Dynasty Three, ascended to the throne, he began building his tomb at Saqqara, near Memphis, which he made his capital. He put his vizier or chief minister, Imhotep, in charge of the work. This choice was either excellent planning or tremendously good luck, for

Imhotep was a genius who erected for Djoser the first monumental stone building in the Near East.² Imhotep's abilities were so great that later generations considered him a god, and today Djoser is remembered primarily because of the Step Pyramid Imhotep created. Officials of the Early Dynastic Period had built their mud-brick *mastaba* tombs on the edge of the desert plateau just northwest of Memphis. Imhotep chose a site for Djoser's tomb a little farther south and slightly higher on the plateau than the earlier *mastabas*. Thus, the large *mastaba* he was intending to build could have been seen easily from Memphis. His first departure from tradition was the use of stone rather than brick for the *mastaba*, though the stones were cut to the size of large mud-bricks. Stone had been used for statues and for portions of buildings before this time. For example, at the end of the Second Dynasty Khasekhemwy had lined the burial chamber beneath his *mastaba* with stones and had built a vast enclosure at Saqqara (still mostly unexcavated) that had solid masonry at its corners. Most of its stones seem to have been reused to build Djoser's step-pyramid (Wilkinson 2013: 52–53). However, palaces, *mastabas*, temples, and other structures had continued to be made primarily of brick.

After completing this stone *mastaba*, Imhotep enlarged it twice. Then he decided on a completely different plan. He enlarged the basic *mastaba* a bit more, then erected a series of three other *mastaba*-like structures on top of it, each a little smaller than its predecessor. This produced a four-stage stepped pyramid—the first pyramid ever built. Djoser must have been in very good health, because Imhotep decided he had time to make the pyramid even larger. He increased the size of the base to 411 by 358 feet and added two more steps, making a six-stepped pyramid 204 feet high. Around this massive structure Imhotep constructed many dummy buildings with false doors that cannot actually be entered; living persons were not meant to use them. There is evidence that these fake structures were buried almost immediately after their construction. Among them is a *heb-sed* court and series of stone shrines for celebrating the king's jubilee festivals through eternity (see [Figure 5.5](#)). Imhotep surrounded the entire complex (which was more than 1,700 feet long and 900 feet wide) with a huge offset-inset enclosure wall thirty-four feet high. The manpower and resources needed to construct these monuments testify to Egypt's growing human and economic wealth and to Djoser's absolute control over both.



Figure 5.5 The Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara

The dummy *heb-sed* court and shrines can be seen in the foreground. Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

The burial complex constructed by Imhotep is a large version of the earlier royal *mastaba* tomb translated into stone. The *mastaba* had been the palace in which the dead king's *ka* would live for eternity, while his *ba* occasionally visited places he had loved within this world and his *akh* joined the gods in the other world. Over the shaft leading to a *mastaba*'s burial chamber was an earthen or mud-brick mound, a magical version of the mound of creation that first rose from the waters of Nun. Just as all life had come from that original creation mound, so this mound had the power to guarantee the eternal life of the king whose body was beneath it. Djoser's Step Pyramid, built over his burial chamber, is a monumental creation mound, and the fake buildings around it are the king's palace and official buildings that his spirit can magically use forever.

Perhaps Imhotep's use of a stepped pyramid over the burial chamber was intended just to make the structure higher and thus more mound-like. However, it may also have been intended to represent a gigantic magical staircase to heaven. The later Pyramid Texts, many of which preserve burial rituals probably in use at Djoser's time (if not earlier), include the dead king's statement that "a stairway to the sky is set up for me that I might ascend on it to the sky" (see [Document 5.1](#), Spell 267 and Edwards 1993: 280). It would not have bothered Egyptians for the pyramid to be both the creation mound and a magical staircase. For them, embracing one magical identification did not

mean rejecting others. In fact, they believed that the more such identifications there were, the better.

Document 5.1 Examples of the Pyramid Texts

The Pyramid Texts were found inscribed on the walls of pyramids belonging to the latter part of the Old Kingdom. They generally consist of short spells or potent formulas designed to magically insure that the deceased king will live forever in the other world. The examples are meant to guarantee that the king will join the other great gods in the sky. Most of these spells probably were already ancient when written down in the Fifth and Sixth dynasties, and most of the ideas they contain likely go back to the Early Dynastic Period or earlier. The translation is from Faulkner (1969: 44–46, 76, 183), with titles and explanatory material in square brackets added by W. Stiebing.

Spell 217: The King Joins the Sun God

O Re^c-Atum, this King comes to you, an imperishable spirit [*akh*], lord of the affairs(?) of the place of the four pillars; your son comes to you, this King comes to you. May [both of] you traverse the sky, being united in the darkness; may you rise in the horizon [*akhet*], in the place where it is well with you....

O Re^c-Atum, your son comes to you, the King comes to you; raise him up, enclose him in your embrace, for he is the son of your body for ever.

Spell 219: The King Is Identified with Osiris

O Atum, this one here [the King] is your son Osiris whom you have caused to be restored that he may live. If he [Osiris] lives, this King will live; if he does not die, this King will not die; if he is not destroyed, this King will not be destroyed; if he does not mourn, this King will not mourn; if he mourns, this King will mourn.

Spell 267: The King Joins Re in His Solar Boat

A stairway to the sky is set up for me that I may ascend on it to the sky, and I ascend on the smoke of the great censuring.

I fly up as a bird and alight as a beetle; I fly up as a bird and alight as a beetle on the empty throne which is in your bark, O Re'. Stand up, remove yourself, O you who do not know the Thicket of Reeds, that I may sit in your place and row over the sky in your bark, O Re', that I may push off from the land in your bark, O Re'. When you ascend from the horizon [akhet], my sceptre will be in my hand as one who rows your bark, O Re'.

Spell 508: The King Ascends on the Sun's Rays

I have laid down for myself this sunshine of yours as a stairway [or ramp] under my feet on which I will ascend to that mother of mine, the living uraeus [protective snake goddess] which should be upon me, O Re'. She will have compassion on me and will give me her breast that I may suck it; "My son," says she, "take this breast of mine and suck it," says she; "turn about, O you who have not yet come to the number of your days."

The next two successors of Djoser, Sekhemkhet and Khaba, followed his lead and constructed stepped pyramids for themselves. However, these structures were never completed. Only the lowest layers survive, suggesting that these kings died only a few years after work on their burial monuments had begun. We also know little about Nebka (also known as Sanakhte or Zanakht, his Horus name). We cannot even be sure of his position within the dynasty. A couple of ancient king lists make him the first king of the Third Dynasty. However, other lists make him the next to last king of the dynasty and all attestations of his name from Old Kingdom materials indicate that he reigned sometime after Djoser. Recently excavated evidence from Abydos shows that Djoser buried Khasekhemwy, the final king of Dynasty Two, proving that there was no king of Dynasty Three before Djoser (Seidlmayer 2006: 118). Nebka apparently began Egyptian mining of Sinai's turquoise (and possibly copper) deposits. He also seems to have been the first king to use a cartouche for his personal name. The last king of the dynasty, Huni, constructed three small step pyramids in southern Egypt, but the location of his main structure and burial is unknown.

The Zenith of Royal Power: The Fourth Dynasty (c. 2543–

Snefru (“He of Beauty” or “He of Perfection,” c. 2543–2510 BCE), first king of the Fourth Dynasty, seems to have instituted a policy of ending local autonomy in Egypt’s provinces and replacing it with centralized control. New towns replaced the traditional sites as capitals of the nomes, and nobles now were to be buried in cemeteries around the ruler’s tomb rather than in local burial grounds throughout Egypt (Wilkinson 2013: 59). He also constructed the first true pyramid (one with smooth sides). The smooth sides of these pyramids probably represented the sun’s rays as ramps upon which the king could mount to heaven (see [Document 5.1](#), Spell 508). However, each true pyramid had a step pyramid within it, so it could still also serve as a staircase to heaven. In addition, it was still a mound of creation. All these magical relationships were true simultaneously for Egyptians, making each pyramid a source of great spiritual power. Snefru was also the greatest pyramid builder in Egyptian history. He built three large pyramids (one at Meidum and two at Dahshur) and a smaller step pyramid at Seila. The total volume of these structures is slightly larger than that of the Great Pyramid of Giza built by his son Khufu.

Snefru was succeeded by his son, Khufu (“Protected by [Khnum],” c. 2509–2483 BCE), later known to the Greeks as Cheops. Under Khufu, the centralization of power into pharaoh’s hands, the size and efficiency of the bureaucracy needed to exercise his authority, and Egypt’s human and other resources seem to have reached their peak. Thus, he was able to construct the Great Pyramid, the largest Egyptian pyramid and the most impressive of the wonders of the ancient world.³

Khufu erected his pyramid, called *Akhet Khufu* (“The Horizon of Khufu,” or better, “The Place of Khufu’s Transfiguration”), at Giza, a few miles north of Saqqara. Its sheer size inspires awe. It was 756 feet long on each side and originally 481 feet high. That means that its base would cover more than four square city blocks, and it would have been about eighteen feet higher than the top of the dome of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome and more than 170 feet higher than the Statue of Liberty’s torch. Until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, the Great Pyramid was the tallest structure on earth. The Great Pyramid contains about 2.3 million stone blocks, averaging about a ton or more each (see [Figure 5.6](#)). The largest of its stones weighs about fifty tons.

The accuracy of the builders is also amazing. The perimeter of the base sits on an almost perfectly level plane with the southeast corner only a little more than one-half inch higher than the northwest corner. The sides are aligned almost exactly to true north-south and east-west, the average error being only

3'6" (less than 1/15 of a degree). Furthermore, all of this was done with only the relatively primitive technology available to the ancient Egyptians.



Figure 5.6 The Sides of the Great Pyramid Today

This view shows the immense size of the stones. The outer casing stones that would have made the sides smooth were robbed long ago. Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

When Herodotus visited Egypt in the fifth century BCE, he was told that 400,000 men (working in three-month shifts of 100,000 men each) labored for twenty years to build the Great Pyramid. However, experiments moving stones into place and study of the pyramid-builders' town and tombs uncovered at Giza suggests that only about 10,000 to 20,000 people (men and women) were used at a time, 8,000–15,000 laborers and several thousand craftsmen, overseers, bakers, cooks, and other specialists. Many laborers served in distant quarries or on boats to carry food supplies or stones to Giza in addition to the workers who lived at the pyramid site. Evidence from bones found in the workers' tombs at Giza proves that the pyramid builders were native Egyptians, not foreign slaves (Hawass 2006: 157–176). This *corvée* labor force was gathered from all parts of Egypt, and at least the unskilled laborers would have been periodically replaced with a new group of recruits, but probably only once a year. Using yearly shifts of 10,000 or 20,000 at a time, the Egyptians should have been able to complete the Great Pyramid in the twenty years mentioned by Herodotus. It should be noted that archaeologists found a stone block near the mid-level of Snefru's North Pyramid at Dahshur with a painted date only four years later than that on a similar stone at the pyramid's base.

Most of the limestone for the core of the pyramid was quarried near the pyramid site. However, the fine limestone for the outer casing stones came from Tura, on the east bank of the Nile. The builders obtained the granite for columns, doorjambs, lintels, and other special features from Aswan, in the south. The floodwaters facilitated movement of these fine stones down the Nile and allowed them to be brought right up to the desert plateau. Once there, work gangs probably placed them on sleds (made with wood imported from Lebanon) and dragged them up a causeway to the pyramid. At the pyramid, the workmen would have dragged the stone-laden sleds up ramps made from mud-brick, earth, and rubble. However, we do not know how the ramps were arranged. There are several plausible theories, but we will probably never know which is correct unless a partially finished pyramid is discovered with its construction ramps still in place. (For a theory involving *internal* ramps, see Brier and Houdin 2008).

The expertise of the architects and engineers who designed the pyramids and calculated the volume of stone that would be needed for their construction is astounding. However, the most amazing aspect of pyramid construction is not the movement of the huge stones (which took only a great amount of brute force), but the subsidiary planning and organization that was necessary. Someone had to decide how many people would be needed for each of the necessary construction-related tasks. Others had to be ready to secure these workers and take them to their new occupations. Still others had to store food to feed the multitude of workers at the various sites (quarries, docks, boats, and pyramid). Someone also had to calculate the time needed for each job and work out a timetable so that the activities of the various work gangs were synchronized for maximum efficiency. The skill of the bureaucrats who did all this planning was equal to that of the pyramids' designers.

When the whole complex was finished, an enclosure wall twenty-six feet high surrounded the Great Pyramid. On the eastern side, there were four smaller pyramids (three for queens and one possibly dedicated to Khufu's *ka*), a mortuary temple, a causeway, and a valley temple. Archaeologists have also found seven boat pits. Five are boat-shaped excavations in the rock, which were probably intended to magically become boats on which the king could travel with Re across the heavens. However, two of the pits were rectangular and contained dismantled full-size wooden boats. It is likely that these boats were the ones used to take Khufu's body and other funerary objects across the Nile at the time of burial. One of these boats has been restored and is on display in a museum next to the Great Pyramid.

Some scholars have emphasized that since the Great Pyramid and its accompanying structures magically enabled the king to join his fellow gods in the sky and rule there forever, most Egyptians would not have begrudged the

labor and expenditure it took to build it. It would have benefited all Egyptians because the king would supposedly continue to bless Egypt from the beyond. Also, the pyramids have been viewed as economic engines and catalysts for internal colonization. When a pyramid was built, the pharaoh gave it and its associated temples enormous endowments of land, produce, and people. These endowments often meant the foundation of new towns, ranches, or farms in the provinces, helping develop the country (Lehner 1997: 9). However, as Toby Wilkinson points out, it is unlikely that many villagers were happy or felt worshipful about being drafted to serve on one of the king's construction gangs. Wilkinson argues that the Great Pyramid was not a national project designed to benefit all Egyptians. "It was the ultimate projection of absolute power" (Wilkinson 2013: 69). In his view, the Egyptian monarchy was "not so much enlightened despotism as despotism, pure and simple" (2013: 62).

When Khufu died, his son Djedefre ("Enduring Like Re") became pharaoh (c. 2482–2475 BCE) and began building a pyramid at Abu Rawash, north of Giza. He died after a short reign, leaving his tomb unfinished. His successor (a son or brother) Khafre ("Appearing Like Re," Chephren to the Greeks) then became king, reigning c. 2474 to 2450 BCE. His architects and engineers designed a pyramid just slightly smaller than Khufu's (708 feet to a side, 471 feet high), and Khafre decided to erect it at Giza. However, he did not want his pyramid overshadowed by Khufu's. So, his builders placed it on higher ground, creating the illusion that it is larger than its illustrious neighbor.



Figure 5.7 The Great Sphinx and Khafre's Pyramid

Note how the limestone of the Sphinx's body is badly eroded. Khafre's Causeway is visible behind the Sphinx and ruins of the Sphinx temple are in the foreground.

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Like all of the Fourth Dynasty pyramids, Khafre's pyramid had a mortuary temple at the pyramid site connected by a long causeway to a valley temple at the edge of the desert plateau. Just north of the causeway near the valley temple, a depression had been created by quarrying stone for the valley temple's construction. However, a large spur of stone was left in the center, because it was of poor quality and had fissures running through it. Despite its faults, Khafre's sculptors carved it into a huge hybrid creature with the body of a recumbent lion and the head of the king (see [Figure 5.7](#)). This Great Sphinx was over 240 feet long and 66 feet high. It was regarded as an embodiment of Horus and Atum and a symbol of divine kingship (Jordan 1998: 181–182).

Debating the Evidence: Dating the Giza Pyramids and Great Sphinx

In recent decades, there have been several theories claiming that the Giza pyramids and/or Great Sphinx were much older than the time of Khufu and Khafre. Some would date them as early as 10,500 BCE, when at the vernal equinox, the sun would have arisen at dawn in the constellation Leo (seen as a lion like the Sphinx) at exactly the place toward which the Great Sphinx is staring. Supporters of this view also claim that the pyramids of Giza, Abu Rawash, and Zawiyet el-Aryan were meant to represent on the ground the positions of the stars in the constellation Orion. Actually, as Paul Jordan has pointed out (1998: 138), “there is nothing to suggest that the Egyptians entertained any of the signs of the zodiac, including Leo... before the last few centuries B.C.E.” Furthermore, the positions of the pyramids of Giza, Abu Rawash, and Zawiyet el-Aryan do not correctly correspond to the positions of stars in Orion. There are also several stars of Orion that have no matching pyramids at all (Chadwick 1996; Jordan 1998: 139–143).

Moreover, radiocarbon dates of charcoal from the Giza pyramids do not support dating them earlier than the beginning of Egypt's dynastic history.⁴ Also, archaeologists have found the villages or towns where pyramid builders lived while the Giza pyramids were being erected. The one occupied during the construction of the Great Pyramid was near Khufu's valley temple and was called *Gerget Khufu* (“Settlement of Khufu”). During the following reigns, a larger town was built further south, at the edge of the Giza plateau. The archaeological evidence from these towns shows that they belong to the Fourth

Dynasty (Hawass 2006: 157–176; Wilkinson 2013: 69–70). Furthermore, there is evidence for the pyramids' dates on the stones within them. Competing work gangs painted their names on the stones they moved. These are not inscriptions on the outer casing stones that could have been added at any time after the pyramids were built. The brief inscriptions are on the rough-cut inner stones that were never meant to be seen, and they could not have been written after their respective pyramids were finished. These work gangs often had names that included that of the current pharaoh such as “Friends of Khufu,” “The Craftsman Gang—How Powerful is the White Crown of Khnum Khufu,” or “Drunkards of Menkaure” (Edwards 1961: 262; Lehner 1997: 224), proving that the inner stones of the Giza pyramids were laid during the Fourth Dynasty. Finally, there is no archaeological evidence of any advanced civilization or culture in Egypt around 10,500 BCE that could have created the pyramids or Sphinx.

Geologist Robert Schoch has raised a more serious challenge to the conventional dating of the Great Sphinx. Study of the Great Sphinx convinced Dr. Schoch that it had been eroded by rainwater (see [Figure 5.7](#)). The last time when there would have been sufficient rainfall in the area to create such erosion, he argued, was the wet period between c. 7000 and 5000 BCE. Thus, he believes that the Sphinx was carved at least 2,500 years before the time of Khafre (Schoch 1992).

However, further geological study of the Sphinx has shown that Schoch's chronological conclusions are unwarranted. The erosion of the Sphinx and its enclosure was probably not caused primarily by running water (though there was more rainfall in the region in Old Kingdom times than at present). Much of the erosion probably resulted from accelerated weathering due to a covering of wet sand. The Sphinx often has been covered with sand in both ancient and modern times. The sand trapped and held the rain runoff coming from the area around the pyramids. Also, at times the Nile floods either reached the enclosure around the Sphinx or came close enough for water to be drawn into the sand by capillary action (Harrell 1994a, 1994b; Jordan 1998: 153–156). It has also been shown that porous limestone like that of the body of the Sphinx often disintegrates in a desert climate due to condensation produced by temperature extremes. As moisture condenses, seeps into the stone, then evaporates, the expansion of salt crystals within the stone causes pieces of the surface to flake off (Gauri et al. 1995; Jordan 1998: 160–161). So the geological evidence does not force us to adopt a date for the Sphinx earlier than the Old Kingdom. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence strongly supports a date in Khafre's reign. Therefore, Egyptologists have rejected pre-Fourth Dynasty dates for both the Giza pyramids and the Great Sphinx (Hawass and Lehner 1994; Jordan 1998: 159–161).

The Latter Part of the Old Kingdom: Dynasties 5 and 6 (c. 2435–2150 BCE)

The power of Fourth Dynasty pharaohs probably decreased dramatically after the reign of Khafre. He seems to have been followed by an unknown king who only reigned for one or two years. This unknown king's successor Menkaure ("Eternal Like the Souls of Re," Mycerinus to the Greeks), built the third pyramid at Giza. However, it is only half the size of the other two, though Menkaure tried to compensate for lack of size by using red granite casing stones around the bottom nineteen courses of the pyramid. The following king, Shepseskaf, built only a large stone *mastaba* at Saqqara instead of a pyramid. Shepseskaf did not have any sons. So the throne passed to his cousin and brother-in-law, Userkaf, whose reign marks the official beginning of Dynasty 5.

However, there may have been another brief reign by a female pharaoh, named Khentkawes, between those of Shepseskaf and Userkaf. Later legend claimed that the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty were the direct offspring of Re and a priestess of Re. This story may not only recall the importance Re came to have in Dynasty 5, but also possibly the important role that a woman played in the change of dynasties. Khentkawes probably was the mother of Userkaf and his successor Sahure. A title on the door of her tomb may be read "The Mother of Two Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt." However, it could also be translated "The King of Upper and Lower Egypt and Mother of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt." Furthermore, on the same granite door there is an incised drawing of the "queen" wearing the uraeus and a false beard, both symbols of kingship (Lehner 1997: 138). So, although she was not included in the later king lists, Khentkawes may have ruled for a brief time as pharaoh before passing power on to her son, Userkaf.

The Old Kingdom lasted for almost 300 years after the end of the Fourth Dynasty, but there apparently was a very slow decline in royal authority. For most of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, this gradual decline had little effect on ordinary Egyptians. The almost imperceptible deterioration of royal power resulted mainly from actions of the pharaohs themselves abetted by forces beyond their control. One of the problems pharaohs brought upon themselves was the growing power of the sun god Re and his priests at Heliopolis. Before the time of Khafre, the king was the primary national deity for Egypt. Most of the wealth and labor of the country was dedicated to constructing the king's tomb, which would protect his body forever and guarantee him an afterlife. The Fourth Dynasty kings, however, began emphasizing Re, a new name for the sun god of Heliopolis. *Re* had been used as a word for the sun as a physical

object earlier, but it seems to have become a divine name at the end of the Third Dynasty. The Fourth Dynasty rulers' use of true pyramids and boat-pits for solar barges as well as Khafre's adoption of the title "Son of Re" illustrate their growing allegiance to this god. They made Re into a national deity and elevated him to supremacy within the pantheon. Fifth Dynasty kings built sun temples containing large obelisks (symbols of Re) near their own poorly constructed pyramids. The kings also began to give land donations to these temples and to others throughout Egypt, making them financially independent and their priests more self-reliant. The land grants also reduced the resources available to the crown. Even Horus, the god believed to be incarnate in the pharaoh, became identified with Re. The compound deity was known as Re-Horakhty, "Re, the Horus of the Horizon" (or "Re, the Horus [arising] from the *akhet* [the place of transformation]").

The wealthy members of the upper class also became more independent and self-reliant during the Fifth and Sixth dynasties. In the early part of the Old Kingdom, the most important officials and governors usually had been loyal members of the royal family. However, as the royal power and control grew, so too did the bureaucracy, reducing the ruler's effective oversight of it. Also, fewer of its leaders were relatives of the king and many bureaucratic positions became hereditary, further reducing the king's control. Moreover, officials often had to serve at great distances from pharaoh, leading them to become more autonomous. The great Egyptologist John Wilson (1951: 95) pointed out that this "decentralization showed itself in a clear geographic way." In the Fourth Dynasty, officials had clustered their *mastabas* around the pyramid of pharaoh in the hope that being near his awesome power would assure them an afterlife. During the Fifth Dynasty, many officials chose to be buried in the districts where they had lived and worked. By the Sixth Dynasty, burial in the provincial areas had become the norm. Clearly the members of the bureaucracy no longer believed that their immortality depended on proximity to the king.

Finally, nature itself was working to weaken Egypt's kings. As we saw in [Chapters 3 and 4](#), the Near East seems to have experienced a period of drought around 2200 BCE. There is evidence that the Nile flood levels had been gradually declining during the Old Kingdom, and that they were seriously low between c. 2200 and 2100 BCE. Barbara Bell (1971) reached this conclusion based on analysis of textual evidence. However, her views have been supported by studies of past levels of the lakes that serve as sources of the Nile (Butzer 1976: 28–33; 1995: Vol. 1, 133, 136, 138) and of fossilized pollen and microscopic charcoal in Nile Delta sediments spanning 7,000 years (Bernhardt et al. 2012). These scientific studies also indicate severe drought in the Nile valley around 2100 BCE. The consequent reduction in agricultural production not only would

have had an economic impact, but also psychological, religious, and political effects. If pharaoh could not assure adequate Nile floods and food production, he was not maintaining *ma 'at*. How, then, could he be a god? Loss of confidence in the king's ability to intercede with his fellow deities, when combined with the other factors weakening royal authority, proved to be disastrous.

The last moderately strong king of the Sixth Dynasty was Pepi II, who had the longest recorded reign in Egyptian history. He came to the throne as a young child and ruled for more than ninety years according to both the Turin Canon and Manetho. Such a long reign, with its almost inevitable consequence—reduction of the king's vigor for a time at its end—very probably contributed to the collapse of central authority. Pepi's successor seems to have died after a reign of only about a year. However, this successor's wife, Nitigret (called Nitocris by Manetho and the Turin Canon), probably continued ruling for another two or three years. Once again, a woman ruler closed out a dynasty, and soon after her death, the Old Kingdom's more than 400 years of stability and order came to an end.

Old Kingdom Society and Culture

Social Structure

The nature of the surviving sources makes our knowledge of early Egyptian society very incomplete. However, the basic social structure that would prevail through most of Egyptian history probably was in place at the beginning of the Old Kingdom. At the top of the social hierarchy, of course, was the royal family. Though in theory, the king, as a god, had absolute authority and owned everything in Egypt, he and his close relatives were hemmed in by obligations of ritual and duty. The mores or conventions that applied to the king and his family were sometimes quite different from those of the rest of the population. For example, while most Egyptians were monogamous (though wealthy individuals often had several concubines in addition to a wife), pharaohs usually had several wives. In addition, kings often married their sisters (as the gods did in Egyptian myths) and sometimes their daughters, while other Egyptians almost always married outside of their immediate families. The multiple roles that some women of the royal family held as sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers of pharaohs gave them power that ordinary women did

not have. As we have seen, occasionally a queen could rule the country as regent for her son or possibly even as king in the cases of Khentkawes and Nitiquet (Nitocris). However, it is clear that these examples of female rule were exceptional cases in times of crisis. Egyptian ideology normally did not allow for the possibility of a female king.

Below the royal family were the families of the viziers, provincial governors, priests of major deities, and other high-ranking members of pharaoh's bureaucracy. Minor officials and priests of local gods were a bit lower in the social order. Nevertheless, they were all wealthy individuals, and the scenes in their tombs show the lives of luxury they generally led. Most of these officials probably derived from wealthy landowning families of Predynastic times. However, there was some social mobility within the elite upper class, for pharaoh could advance capable individuals of modest means to high positions and grant them estates and other rewards. He also could remove persons from office and seize their lands. As we have seen, though, kings tended to make many offices hereditary, and the lands granted to these families essentially became their private property. Thus, toward the latter part of the Old Kingdom, many of these wealthy individuals were powerful in their own right and largely independent of royal oversight.

Craftsmen and artisans (e.g., goldsmiths, sculptors, painters, jewelers, carpenters) as well as other specialized workers (including bakers, millers, potters, stone masons, vintners, sailors, and merchants) formed a very small "middle class" between the wealthy landowners and the peasants. It is not known how such individuals were recruited, other than children following in the occupations of their parents. Unlike craftsmen in the largely free-enterprise system of Mesopotamia, most Egyptian artisans and skilled workers performed specialized tasks in large workshops owned by wealthy individuals or pharaoh. The best artisans, of course, were in pharaoh's employ, making objects for the king's burial or foreign trade (which was largely a royal monopoly).

In contrast with Mesopotamia, Egypt was not a highly urban society. Large towns were the domain of priests and bureaucrats or skilled craftsmen otherwise tied to the state. The vast majority of the Egyptian people were semi-free peasants. They were somewhat like the serfs of the western European Middle Ages. They farmed land that belonged to pharaoh, temples, or members of the upper class. They were not allowed to leave the estates on which they worked, and if the land changed hands, the peasants went with it. Because resident peasants could not be evicted, though, profits for landowners were not as high as they might have been if the land had been unoccupied. Thus, prices for land were very low in Old Kingdom Egypt (about two acres for a cow or its equivalent). The peasants not only supplied the food Egypt needed, they also provided the labor that built Egypt's great monuments. Most

peasants lived as their fathers and grandfathers had lived—in small houses in villages just beyond the limits of the inundation. They buried their dead in the sand as in Predynastic times. While they may have hoped for an afterlife, because they did not have the money for tombs, mummification, and elaborate magical burial rites, they probably had little confidence that their hopes would be fulfilled.

In many ancient societies, free women ranked near the bottom of the social ladder, just slightly higher than slaves. However, though Egypt was a patriarchal society, women had many rights. They could own property and dispose of it as they saw fit. They could enter into contracts with individuals other than their husbands and sue in court. They were entitled to generous compensation if they were divorced without being at fault. And in their marriages, they were the virtual equals of their husbands. They even seem to have earned equal pay for equal work. Certain occupations such as spinning and weaving probably were reserved for women. However, texts also mention women as overseers of restaurants, wig shops, and other businesses. There are even references to women doctors and a female overseer of doctors (Strouhal 1992: 59; Robins 1993: especially 111–141).

Slaves were at the bottom of the social pyramid. They worked as servants in temples, royal palaces, and the houses of the nobility. They were also used for brutal labor such as quarrying stone. However, they were drawn primarily from war captives and their numbers were never very high. The Egyptian peasants themselves performed most of the necessary labor, whether in agriculture or monument construction.

Religion and Ritual

Mesopotamians, Hittites, Canaanites, and other Near Eastern people generally worshipped anthropomorphic gods. However, the Egyptians often depicted their deities with human bodies and animal heads or totally in animal form. Horus (a sky and solar deity who was god of kingship) was a falcon (see [Figure 5.8](#)); Hathor (a mother goddess), a cow; Thoth (god of writing and knowledge), an ibis; Sobek (a water god associated with fertility), a crocodile; Sekhmet (a fierce martial goddess who could also ward off pestilence), a lioness; and so forth. A feature of Egyptian religion that generally confounds Westerners is the Egyptians' ability to affirm two or more concepts that to us seem contradictory. One myth credits the creation of all that is to Atum (a solar deity), while another ascribes it to Ptah (god of Memphis and patron of craftsmen). The sun was often thought of as Re, but Horus, Khepri (a solar

deity in the form of a scarab beetle), and Atum were other aspects of it on various occasions or at different times of the day. The sun sailed across the sky on a boat or was pushed by a scarab beetle (dung beetle). All these different ideas were simultaneously believed to be true by the Egyptians.

The ancient Egyptians believed that there was divine power all around them, immanent within nature. The world was not just a physical object, an “it”—it was a being in its own right, a “thou” (Frankfort and Frankfort 1946: 4–6). Sometimes Egyptians perceived this divine force in what we would call natural phenomena, such as the sun going through its daily cycle or the Nile’s silt bringing forth vegetation. At other times, the Egyptians recognized aspects of the divine in animals. From very early prehistoric times, Egyptians seem



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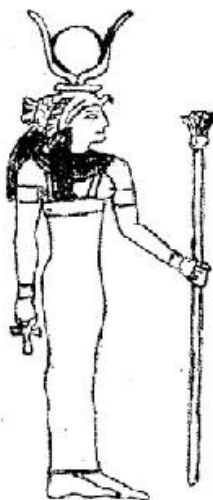
PTAH



RE



THOTH



HATHOR



SETH



HORUS

Figure 5.8 Some Major Egyptian Deities

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

to have believed that to access the power experienced in nature, they had to name and thus particularize divine beings (Luft 1998: 417). On the one hand, this view led to a multiplicity of deities. On the other hand, beneath the many gods was a unity that allowed the Egyptians to easily identify gods with one another. Re-Horakhty, Amun-Re, and other conjoined deities presented no

problems for Egyptians. In the same way, when pharaoh died, he became identified with Osiris, god of the dead, and Re, the sun god, and Atum, the creator god, and any other deity through whom he could live and reign forever. Because of the underlying unity of the gods within Egyptian religion, some scholars describe it as an example of complex polytheism or cosmotheism, that is “polytheistic religions that worship the cosmos as the collective manifestation of various different deities” (Assmann 2002: 204).

As in Mesopotamia, each Egyptian deity had a special cult center, a place where he or she was considered the primary or patron deity. The cult of Horus was originally centered on Hierakonpolis and later Edfu, while Seth’s was at Ombos. Ptah’s main sanctuary was located at Memphis. Atum was god of Heliopolis, and so forth. This situation may derive from prehistoric times when the various areas of Egypt possibly had different gods. However, if there ever was such diversity of religion in Egypt, it had ended by the time of the unification or soon afterward. From the Early Dynastic Period onward a single pantheon of major gods was accepted throughout Egypt. Nevertheless, minor local deities continued to exist, and the importance of various deities rose and fell depending upon the prestige and power of the cities containing their cult centers.

Also, as in Mesopotamia, the most basic Egyptian myths concerned cosmology, beliefs about how the universe came into being and how it was structured. Both cultures agreed that before creation, there was only a watery chaos. Order was brought out of chaos and the gods constantly had to maintain it. However, the Egyptian conceptions about how that happened were somewhat different from those of the Mesopotamians. Egyptians also were much more confident than Mesopotamians that the gods could and would maintain the order (*ma‘at*) they had established.

What is probably the earliest of the official Egyptian cosmologies originated at Heliopolis, center for the worship of Atum, a solar deity. The Egyptian name for Heliopolis (“City of the Sun” in Greek) was Iunu, which was rendered On in Ezekiel 30:17. During the Old Kingdom, Re became another name for the sun god. So, Re was identified with Atum, and Heliopolis became Re’s holy city as well. According to the Heliopolitan myth, originally there was nothing but Nun, a chaotic sea. Then a mound of earth appeared above the waters (just as such life-giving mounds appeared every year when the inundation began to wane). From that primeval island came Atum (“All”), who from himself created everything. In some graphic versions of the story, Atum produced the first two deities, Shu (“dry air”) and Tefnut (“moisture”), by masturbation. Another rendition states that Atum sneezed out Shu and spat out Tefnut. This male and female then mated and brought forth Geb (“earth”) and Nut (“sky”). This couple in turn produced all the other elements of creation. A less physical

version of the myth has Atum create specific gods by naming (that is, differentiating and particularizing) parts of his body.

A different creation story regarded Ptah, patron god of Memphis, as the primary creator god. This so-called Memphite Theology claimed that Ptah was the heart and tongue (mind and speech) of the gods. The heart generated thoughts that were spoken by the tongue, bringing Atum, Re, Horus, and the other gods (the physical world) into being. This more abstract view of creation has often been compared to the Israelite account in Genesis 1 where God creates by merely speaking words. It has also been likened to the concept expressed in the first words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Though it probably got some official support when Memphis became Egypt's capital during the Old Kingdom, this myth never really replaced the Heliopolitan tradition.

Other creation accounts featured Min, a fertility god of Coptos; Amun, a creator god from the area around Thebes; and other deities. However, they remained primarily local stories in early times. The Heliopolitan myth attributing creation to Atum (or later Re-Atum and still later Amun-Re) continued to be the most widely recognized account throughout pharaonic history. It was reflected in the architecture of almost every Egyptian temple from at least the Middle Kingdom onward. A typical temple's floor level gradually rose from its entrance to its holy of holies. This high spot represented (or, in Egyptian thought, magically became) the mound of creation that first rose above the waters of Nun. So, every temple was the place where the world first emerged and "became the very image of the organized cosmos, in other words, a microcosm" (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 88). Thus, each temple was also a powerful structure refashioning the world and reestablishing *ma'at*. In the words of Egyptologist Stephen Quirke, "an Egyptian temple is a machine for the preservation of the universe," and its closest parallels are not with churches, synagogues, or mosques, but rather with power stations producing the energy society needs to function (1992: 70).

It is important to remember that the Egyptians, like most ancient peoples, believed in sympathetic magic. This is the conviction that through spells or ritual one can make a representation actually become the object it represents. So, as mentioned, the high ground beneath a temple did not symbolize the creation mound from which the universe came. It *was* that creation mound with all of the power and energy of the original. In the same way, images of everyday life in tombs were not just "remembrances" of the dead person. They became real again in the afterlife, assuring the tomb owner that he or she would continue to enjoy the depicted possessions, activities, and family relationships forever.

In the temples, the gods, present in tangible form in their cult statues, were housed, clothed, and fed. Pharaoh, himself a god, was the official celebrant of all religious rites. Every morning in every temple in Egypt, pharaoh took his fellow deities' images from their shrines, dressed them in fresh clothes, fed them, and offered them prayers and incense. Every evening he offered them food again, then returned them to their shrines, and closed and bolted the doors. Obviously the king could not be present physically in every temple in Egypt at dawn and sunset. He delegated priests to represent him; but in theory, only the king could properly approach his fellow gods and conduct their rites. This action is repeatedly illustrated in every Egyptian temple whose decoration has survived, and these images made true whatever they depicted.

The creation of the universe was not only reflected in temples, but also in the coronation rites of each new king and in New Year rituals. The beginning of each reign was a new creation, a renewal of *ma'at* by a new incarnation of Horus, and a reunification of the Two Lands. Also, as in Mesopotamia and other areas, the start of each New Year was a time of crisis requiring rituals to maintain the establishment of this orderly universe. Creation also was renewed during the *heb-sed* or jubilee festival, usually celebrated when a king had been on the throne for thirty years. It was then repeated at varying intervals thereafter. This rite goes back to Predynastic times and probably originally was a ritual to renew the king's vitality. It became, however, not only a rite of rejuvenation, but also an enthronement ceremony. On the first day of the festival, a statue of the old king was buried. Then, the "new" pharaoh was again crowned king of Upper and Lower Egypt, uniting the Two Lands once more. And, just as at the original coronation, so during the *heb-sed* the world was ritually generated anew.

Except for priests and other temple personnel, commoners, especially the peasants, had little or no part to play in the official rites of the major state deities except as observers at various festivals. For example, during the *Opet*-festival celebrated at Thebes in New Kingdom times, representatives of the common people and the nobility were allowed into the Luxor Temple's court to witness the rites. When the king and cult statues processed from one place to another, cheering crowds lined the routes and gathered at the way stations where the procession rested. They got to see the barques, or portable shrines, if not the cult statues of their gods, and offer them adoration, hymns, and perhaps petitions. Commoners could also offer prayers and petitions to *ka* statues of kings that were usually in front of temples. These images of the divine *ka* embodied in the king would pass the petitions on to the other gods.

Usually, though, ordinary citizens' direct worship was concentrated on minor divinities that watched over individuals and households. Commoners prayed primarily to Bes, a dwarf who warded off sickness and evil and

promoted fertility, and to Tauret, the pregnant hippopotamus goddess who protected women during pregnancy and childbirth. For the rest, they were confident that pharaoh would preserve *ma 'at*, assuring that the Nile floods would be adequate, crops would flourish, and all would be well. Finally, when death came, they hoped for rebirth into another world where they would eternally enjoy a life much like the one they had lived here.

Art and Science

We have already noted that the essentials of the ancient Egyptian worldview and religion were in place by the end of the Early Dynastic Age. The basics of Egyptian art and science also go back to Old Kingdom times or earlier. Almost all Egyptian art was created for religious purposes—to glorify the king or other gods or for magical applications within tombs. For example, the walls of *mastabas* belonging to various officials were covered with reliefs and paintings depicting the everyday events of this world that they hoped to enjoy forever in the afterlife. Lifelike sculptures were made to house the deceased person's *ka* if anything happened to the body. Later Egyptians regarded Old Kingdom sculpture and painting as “classic.” At various times, especially after periods of disorder and confusion, later Egyptians turned to the Old Kingdom for inspiration. In such periods, artists revived and copied the Old Kingdom's canons of style and proportion.

Early Egyptian discoveries in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine also established the standards for later times. Egyptian mathematicians used a decimal numerical system and were very adept at calculating areas of triangles and quadrilaterals. Though they did not use a constant such as *pi*, they were able to estimate the area of a circle by measuring the diameter, subtracting $\frac{1}{9}$ of it and squaring the result. It is likely that they also knew the principle of the Pythagorean theorem. The Egyptians also became adept at calculating the volumes of various objects such as pyramids, cylinders, and truncated pyramids. However, they did not try to understand the abstract principles behind such calculations. Like the Mesopotamians, Egyptians confined their mathematical thought to solving practical problems such as determining the amount of men and material necessary to build a ramp or pyramid of a certain size or calculating the amount of food necessary to feed the workers engaged in such tasks.

Egyptian astronomy was also essentially practical. Early observation of the stars led to the realization that after a period of invisibility, the star Sirius (*Sepdet* to the Egyptians) reappears at about the time the Nile's inundation

begins. Thus, Egyptians made the day when Sirius reappears the first day of the civil New Year. They also had a natural calendar of 12 lunar months (29 1/2 days each) that was used for determining dates for various religious celebrations. Their observations of the fixed northern stars allowed them to bisect the rising and setting points of these stars and thus determine true north. We have already mentioned how precisely this was done in orienting the sides of the Great Pyramid to true north, south, east, and west.

The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, a late copy of what probably was an Old Kingdom composition, indicates the state of early Egyptian medicine (see [Document 5.2](#)). It shows that Egyptian doctors knew that the heart “speaks” in several parts of the body and that they estimated a patient’s general condition by observing whether his pulse was too fast or too slow. It also provides descriptions of how to treat various kinds of broken bones, recommending rest, medications, and certain foods in addition to physically setting the bones. For its time, it is remarkably scientific, generally omitting references to demons and magic. However, like Mesopotamian doctors, Egyptian physicians often used magic as part of their treatments. Nevertheless, because of the practice of mummification, Egyptian doctors seem to have developed a better understanding of anatomy and far greater surgical skills than their Mesopotamian counterparts. In medicine, as in other areas, later Egyptian knowledge was firmly based on the accomplishments of the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom eras.

Document 5.2 The Diagnosis and Treatment of Two Injuries

The following examples of an Egyptian doctor’s diagnosis and recommended treatment for two injuries are from the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus. This composition has generally been thought to be the work of an Old Kingdom army surgeon, but some scholars think it might have come from a doctor who treated construction-related injuries (such as those incurred while building a pyramid). The text indicates which injuries can be cured (“an injury I will deal with”) and which ones are hopeless (“an injury not treated”). The translation is from Eyre (1997: 97). For a translation of the entire text see Allen (2005). The question marks in square brackets are in the original translation, but the sentence in parentheses at the end of the second selection is by W. Stiebing.

A Bone-Deep Wound above the Eyebrow

“You probe his wound, and you bring together his gash for him with a stitch [?], and you say about him: ‘... An injury I will deal with.’ After you stitch [?] it, you bandage it up with fresh meat the first day. If you find that this wound is loose with its stitches [?], then you bind it together with bandages, and anoint it with oil and honey every day until it gets better.”

Symptoms Resulting from a Fractured Skull

“If... you find that swellings protrude behind the break in his skull, and his eye is squinting under it, on the side that has the blow to his skull, and he walks shuffling with the sole of his foot on the side that has the blow to his skull, you diagnose him as one struck by what enters from outside.... An injury not treated.” (A note in the text explains that “what enters from outside” refers to “the breath of god, or death.”)

Debating the Evidence: The People of Ancient Egypt

In the past three or four decades there has been much popular interest in the racial identity of the ancient Egyptians (e.g., Yurco 1989). At one time it was European scholars who raised the issue by proposing theories that Egyptian civilization was produced by the immigration or invasion of a “dynastic race” (e.g., Emery 1961: 30–31, 38–42). The racial identity of these supposed newcomers was not usually stated, but it was assumed that they entered Egypt from western Asia, not from other parts of Africa. Today the idea of a dynastic race in early Egypt has been completely abandoned. However, in recent years the issue of the racial identity of the ancient Egyptians has been broached primarily in Afrocentric works (e.g., Diop 1974; Van Sertima (ed.) 1989; Asante 1998, 1998). Such works attempted to counter Eurocentric racist disparagement of African-Americans and other “blacks” by arguing that almost all civilization originated in Egypt and was created by black Africans. (For a response to Afrocentric claims, see Lefkowitz 1997). Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (1987, 1991 and 2006), though not truly an Afrocentric work, brought much scholarly attention to this subject. Bernal did not emphasize race, but he did argue that much of Greek civilization derived from ancient Egypt (see, e.g., Bernal 1992). Even though most of Bernal’s thesis has been rejected by almost all specialists in ancient Near Eastern civilizations as well as those specializing in the culture of early Greece (Coleman 1992; Young 1992; Lefkowitz and Rogers (eds.) 1996), it has been widely used by Afrocentric scholars.

Why has the racial identity of the ancient Egyptians become important to so

many people? The answer to that question varies, but usually those who ask whether the Egyptians were “white” or “black” accept two incorrect premises. First, the question implies the existence of biologically distinct, relatively pure races that developed in isolation from one another over long periods of time. Second, the questioners generally believe that there is a link between what they regard as “race” and cultural achievement. The racial identity of the ancient Egyptians is important to many individuals because they want to claim early Egypt’s accomplishments for themselves and other members of their own “race.”

Most archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians usually try to avoid such discussions because they realize that the concept of race is a cultural construct rather than a legitimate biological category. Modern genetic studies have shown that only 16 percent of the variations between individual humans exist *between* the major so-called races. On the other hand, 94 percent of the differences occur *within* specific population groups (Smith 2001a: 28). Differences in easily observable physical traits usually provide the basis upon which cultures distinguish “races” from one another. However, often-used racial characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, the shape of eyelids, noses, lips, or other features often vary independently through space and over time. Furthermore, there is no demonstrable relationship between such physical characteristics and intelligence or cultural achievement (Wenke 1999: 469–470; Smith 2001a: 27–28, 2001b).

After 10,000 BCE, as the weather began to become drier, Egypt became a magnet for immigrants from North Africa, Sinai, Palestine, and the southern reaches of the Nile (Leahy 1995: 225; Wenke 1999: 470; Smith 2001a: 28–31). These groups blended with one another to form the population of ancient Egypt which physically was much the same in antiquity as it is today (Brace et al. 1993). In the Nile valley, physical types varied so gradually that differences were perceptible only between places widely separated geographically. Skin color, for example, gradually changed from predominantly tan or olive in the Delta to an almost blue-black near the Nile’s sources. Other physical features varied bit by bit along the same continuum. But such physical differences were not as important to the ancient Egyptians as to modern Westerners. The Egyptians *did* distinguish themselves as a group from Libyans, Nubians, “Asiatics,” and others in artistic representations by emphasizing any differences in facial features and skin tone between these groups and the “average” Egyptian (Leahy 1995: 226–227; Smith 2001b: 112). However, the main criteria Egyptians used to define themselves relative to others were cultural in nature. Anyone who was born in Egypt, spoke the Egyptian language, and shared the Egyptian culture was an Egyptian, a true *person*. (In the ancient Egyptian language, the same word meant “Egyptian” and “person.”) Outsiders were all

thought to be somewhat inferior, but that was because of their cultures, not their skin colors. Foreigners spoke differently, dressed differently, often had a variety of strange beards, wore different hairstyles, and had different customs. To the ancient Egyptians, there was a world of difference between an Egyptian who lived in the Delta and his Libyan or Palestinian neighbors, even though they all might resemble one another physically. In the same way, darker-skinned Egyptian residents of Elephantine were “people,” while their physically similar Nubian neighbors just to the south were only wretched foreigners.

Notes

1. The chronology for ancient Egypt used in this chapter and throughout this book is with only a few very minor differences that in Hornung et al. (eds.) (2006: 490–495). Compared to the chronology used in previous editions of this work, the dates in this chronology for the Old Kingdom are lower by about 70–80 years, for the Middle Kingdom lower by c. 50 years, and for the New Kingdom before Thutmose III lower by c. 11 years.
2. It was once thought to be the oldest monumental stone structure in the world, but it is now known that some of the Megalithic tombs of Malta are almost 1,000 years older.
3. Egyptologist Kate Spence (2000) has argued that the ancient Egyptians used an alignment of stars in the Big and Little Dipper constellations to orient the pyramids to the north. If this argument is valid, comparison of the stars’ past alignments with the orientation of the Great Pyramid indicates that construction of the pyramid began in 2467 BCE $\pm$ 10 years. This date, if correct, would mean that even the lowered dates for the Old Kingdom pharaohs given here are still about 40 years too old. However, her argument has been attacked by Juan A. Belmonte (2001) and is not generally accepted.
4. The radiocarbon dates for charcoal taken from the pyramids varied widely. Some samples provided dates 300–400 years earlier than the dates historians assign to the pyramids, while others (from reeds and straw) clustered right around the historical dates. However, none of the samples supported dates as early as 10,000 BCE. The pyramid builders’ use of old wood or wood from the inner rings of large trees probably accounts for the dates that are too old. See Lehner (1997: 66–67) and J. Shaw (2003).

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The Old Babylonian Period and Its Aftermath

The first half of the second millennium BCE¹ witnessed the rise of several competing kingdoms or empires in Mesopotamia, the best known being that of Hammurabi of Babylon. This era is one of the most culturally significant and best-documented periods in Mesopotamian history. Following the destruction of Babylon c. 1595 BCE, however, new cultures and empires became prominent, those of the Hittites in Anatolia and the Hurrians in Syria. Meanwhile, despite being conquered by a people called the Kassites, southern Mesopotamia maintained its cultural traditions and continued to exercise widespread cultural influence in western Asia.

The “Interregnum” after the Fall of Ur (c. 2000–1800 BCE)

The Assyrian Merchant Colony at Kanesh

In the aftermath of the Ur III state, several new areas gained in prominence, and the excavation of thousands of documents from this period significantly expand our information regarding the fringes of the ancient Near East. Tablet archives from Anatolia, and from the cities of Isin in Mesopotamia and Alalakh and Mari in Syria, demonstrate the dynastic competitions of rival city-states as well as many aspects of daily life during this period. The finds from Anatolia, in particular, illuminate a hitherto unsuspected interregional economic enterprise.

During the century after the collapse of the Ur III Empire (see [Table 6.1](#)), the newly independent city-state of Ashur established more than twenty merchant colonies at Anatolian cities. However, so far only three of them have been

located (at Hattusa, Alişar, and Kanesh with a possible fourth at Acemhöyük). Old Assyrian tablets have been found at all three places, but by far the most come from the colony in the lower city of Kanesh (also known as Nesa or Nesha), modern Kültepe. There archaeologists have found some 23,000 tablets recording merchants’ activities over more than two centuries (c. 1940–1710 BCE). Each large trading community (like the one at Kanesh) was called a *karum*, a word that meant “quay, port, commercial district” in the topographical sense. But *karum* also was used in an institutional sense for an association of merchants, a kind of board of trade with administrative powers to handle the internal affairs of the colony, finance commercial endeavors, arbitrate trading disputes, negotiate commercial treaties, serve as a liaison with local authorities, and maintain contact with the authorities at Ashur. The governmental center of the colony was called the *Bit Karim*, the “*Karum* House” or “*Karum* Office.” Though each merchant owned his own facilities in the colony and was responsible for all his own costs for products, transit, fees, and taxes, the *karum* could punish members who did not pay debts or who otherwise violated established norms. Smaller settlements of Assyrian merchants at less important towns were called *wabaratum* (singular *wabartum*, “trading post”) and were under the jurisdiction of the nearest *karum*. Trade operated under strict terms set by the local Anatolian rulers, set out in treaties. Taxes to the palace and preferential access to goods were set, and in return the palace guaranteed the safety of the roads.

Table 6.1 The Chronology of the Old Babylonian Period²

<i>Babylon</i>	<i>Assyria</i>	<i>Man</i>	<i>Others</i>
	Assyrian trade colonies established in Anatolia		Ishbi-Erra of Isin (2017–1985)
			Gugunum of Larsa (1932–1906)
Sumu-abum (1894–1881)			
Sumu-la-El (1880–1845)			
Sabium (1844–1831)			
Apil-Sin (1830–1813)		Yahdun-Lim (1820–1796)	
Sin-muballit (1812–1793)	Shamshi-Adad (1809–1776)	Yasmah-Adad (1796–1776)	Rim-Sin of Larsa (1822–1763)
Hammurabi (1792–1763)	Ishme-Dagan	Zimri-Lim (1776–1763)	Ibal-pi-El II of Larsa

1750)	(1775–1736)	1758)	Eshnunna 1741– 17??)
	Hammurabi conquers Ashur?	Hammurabi destroys Mari(1758)	Hammurabi conquers Larsa (1763) and destroys Eshnunna(1755)
Samsu-iluna (1749– 1712)			
Abi-eshuh (1711– 1684)		Kassites rule Mari (1700?)	
Ammiditana (1683– 1647)			
Ammisaduqa (1646–1626)			Hattusili I of Hatti (1650–1620)
Samsuditana (1625–1595)			MursililofHatti (1620–1590)
Hittites conquer Babylon (1595)			

Note: All dates are bce and are only approximate.

Large caravans of 200–250 donkeys, usually combining the goods of several merchants, transported commodities back and forth between Ashur and the colonies along protected routes and were taxed several times by local kingdoms along the way (see [Map 6.1](#)). Generally, wealthy Assyrian merchant entrepreneurs operating individually or in partnerships or consortiums hired agents to operate such caravans while the merchants’ sons, other male family members, or hired managers managed the Anatolian end of the business. Thus a community of Assyrian men, many marrying local Anatolian women and establishing families, lived in Anatolian centers. A caravan generally took about three months to cover the approximately 950-mile round trip between Ashur and Kanesh (six weeks out and six weeks back). Their cargo from Ashur to Anatolia was primarily tin (from points further east, mainly Afghanistan and Elam) and woven woolen textiles (from Babylonia), while on the return trip



Cartography by: van der Pijl and G. Barjamovic 2010

Map 6.1 The Trade Dynamics of the Assyrian Colony Period

Map from G. Barjamovic, *A Historical Geography of Anatolia in the Old Assyrian Colony Period*. (Carsten Niebuhr Institute Publications 38). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

it was mostly refined silver and gold. Many donkeys were needed in each caravan, because each donkey could carry only a limited amount of cargo (about 150 pounds of metal or thirty pieces of cloth, each about 4.5 yards square and weighing approximately five pounds).

Despite the length of the trip, the cost of equipment and food for the donkeys and their drivers, various fees and taxes, and the expense of maintaining storage facilities in the *karum*, the trade was still profitable. Anatolia was rich in copper, but tin, needed for the production of bronze (an alloy of about 90 percent copper and 10 percent tin), was scarce there. Somehow the Assyrians managed to monopolize the import of tin into Anatolia, making their merchants a necessary component of the Anatolian economy. Tin sold for twice as much in Anatolia as it did in Ashur, and textiles were sold in Anatolia for three times their purchase price in Mesopotamia. Usually only two round-trip caravans between Ashur and Kanesh were possible each year because of a four-month hiatus in commercial traffic during the winter necessitated by bad weather, snow in the mountain passes, and lack of fodder for the animals. However, two round-trip mercantile journeys usually yielded a 50–100 percent profit for the traders involved. The merchants also sometimes financed direct loans or sold goods on credit with interest rates ranging from 30 to 180 percent. These transactions greatly contributed to the profit earned from the trade. The Kültepe texts provide one small window into a much larger network of exchange that tied together Central Asia, Iran, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia with the Aegean, Levant, and Egypt. The vast

commercial enterprises focused primarily on the acquisition of metals, especially tin, come to characterize the entire second millennium BCE.

During the period covered by the Kanesh tablets, Amorites conquered parts of Assyria, and shortly before 1800 BCE, a chieftain named Shamshi-Adad seized Ashur. The change in leadership, though, does not seem to have affected the Assyrian economy. However, after about 1850 BCE the trade with Anatolia was in decline for unknown reasons. The lower city at Kanesh where the merchants lived had been destroyed around 1835 BCE, probably as a result of intra-Anatolian strife (see the later section on the Hittites). It was quickly rebuilt around three years later and continued to operate for over a century. However, the *karum* did not regain its former prosperity. The Assyrian monopoly over Anatolian importation of tin and cloth seems to have been broken, and Assyrian merchants lost a large portion of their business to others. When the lower city was burned around 1710 BCE it was not reestablished.

The Ascendancy of Isin and Larsa

While the Assyrian-Anatolian caravan trade was flourishing in the north, Amorites continued to move into Mesopotamia, gaining control of many Mesopotamian city-states. In southern Mesopotamia, many of the Amorites had arrived before the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur. As usual, though, within a generation or two, the newcomers became thoroughly “Mesopotamianized,” worshipping Mesopotamian deities, adopting local customs, and speaking and writing Akkadian. Two cities ruled by Amorite dynasties, Isin and Larsa, emerged as Mesopotamia’s most powerful political and cultural centers between c. 2000 and 1800 BCE (see [Table 6.1](#)). Thus, the first part of the Old Babylonian Period, the time between the fall of Ur and the rise of Hammurabi, is sometimes called the Isin-Larsa Period. Ishbi-Erra (c. 2017 to 1985 BCE), the founder of Isin’s Amorite dynasty, came from Mari. He began his career as an official under Ibbi-Sin of the Ur III dynasty. For a few years after becoming ruler of Isin, he remained a vassal of Ur, but he soon declared his independence and established his control over Nippur, Uruk, and Eridu as well. Ishbi-Erra even became master of Ur late in his reign by defeating the Elamite force garrisoned in the city. His son and successor, Shu-ilushu (c. 1984–1975 BCE), carried the fight to Elam and recovered the stolen cult statue of Nanna, Ur’s patron god. Before succumbing to the power of Larsa around 1924 BCE, Isin’s kings ruled the entire lower Euphrates valley from Sippar to the Gulf. Despite their Amorite origins, these monarchs considered themselves the heirs of the Ur III dynasty. They used Sumerian for

their official inscriptions, copied the Ur III administrative system, and, like Shulgi and his successors, had themselves worshipped as gods. Their ardent adoption of Sumerian culture also led them to order copies of Sumerian literary works, and fortunately, many of these copies have survived. The Isin kings were responsible for the final edition of the *Sumerian King List* and the famous lamentations and hymns on the destruction and rebuilding of temples at Ur, Nippur, and other cities.

The Amorite dynasty of Larsa was founded at about the same time as that of Isin, but for much of the twentieth century BCE it remained politically negligible. However, King Gungunum (c. 1932 to 1906 BCE) changed Larsa's fortunes. In his eighth year (c. 1925 BCE), he seized Ur from Lipit-Ishtar of Isin, who died soon afterward. Isin's power waned over the next decade while usurpers battled to gain control of its throne. Meanwhile, Larsa grew stronger, conquering Lagash, Susa, and probably Uruk. However, water shortages caused Larsa to decline, and its dynasty fell to an usurper around 1865 BCE. After this, the fortunes of Isin and Larsa seesawed back and forth until a new enemy, Babylon, rose to threaten both.

During this time of conflict and crisis, there may have occurred an instance of a custom that some think explains the unusual burials in the "Royal Tombs" of Ur—the "substitute king" ceremony. According to a much later Babylonian chronicle, because of bad omens foreshadowing the death of the king, Isin's king Irra-imitti (c. 1868–1861 BCE) tried to placate the gods by placing a commoner on the throne. Later examples of this rite indicate that the "substitute king" would have a brief "reign" during the performance of various propitiation rituals. Then, as a climax of the ritual, the "king" would be killed to appease the gods and fulfill the prediction, whereupon the real king would assume the throne again. This time, though, according to the chronicle, things did not turn out as planned:

That the dynasty might not end, King Irra-imitti made the gardener Enlil-bani take his place upon his throne and put the royal crown upon his head. Irra-imitti died in his palace because he had swallowed boiling broth. Enlil-bani who was upon the throne did not relinquish it and was installed as king.

(Roux 1992: 183)

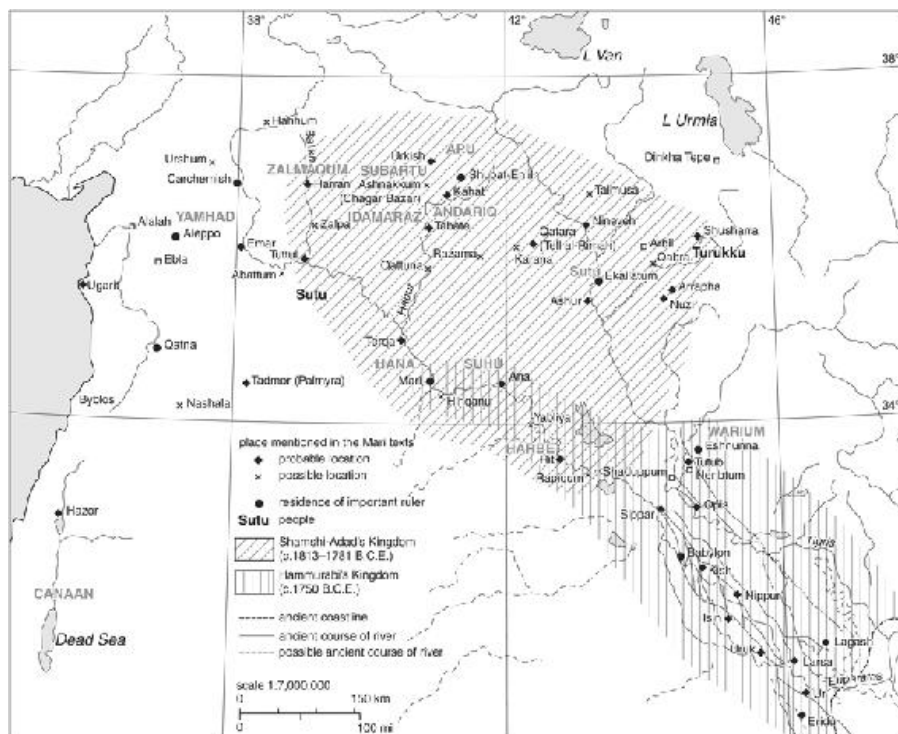
The story may be apocryphal, but there was a real Enlil-bani who ruled Isin for twenty-four years (c. 1860–1837). Regardless of whether or not he was a former gardener who came to the throne as described in the chronicle, Enlil-bani seems to have governed well, though he was unable to restore Isin's power.

Larsa had one last period of glory when Kudur-Mabuk took over the city around 1834 BCE. He seems to have been an Amorite chieftain with an Elamite

name whose tribe had served the Elamites as mercenaries. He was more interested in fighting than in administration, so he put his son, Warad-Sin, on the throne (c. 1834–1823 BCE). However, Warad-Sin died prematurely, and his younger brother, Rim-Sin, succeeded him (c. 1822–1763 BCE). Through military campaigns and diplomacy, Rim-Sin gained support or tribute from much of Sumer, even conquering Isin around 1804 BCE. But, to the north, other foes were blocking further growth of Rim-Sin’s kingdom—the growing empire of Shamshi-Adad and, closer to home, the upstart kingdom of Babylon.

The Era of Hammurabi and His Dynasty (c. 1800–1595 BCE)

The Creation of Shamshi-Adad’s Empire



Map 6.2 The Kingdoms of Shamshi-Adad and Hammurabi

Adapted from Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), pp. 116 and 120.

Shamshi-Adad (“Adad Is My Sun”) was the Amorite ruler of Ekallatum, a town somewhere on the middle Tigris conquered earlier by his father. The young king had not been on the throne for long before the king of Eshnunna overpowered Ekallatum and other towns in the area, forcing Shamshi-Adad to flee to Babylon. He spent a few years building an army, then moved northward and recaptured his old city. Around 1809 BCE he seized Ashur and became Shamshi-Adad I (c. 1809–1776 BCE), Assyria’s first true king (*sharrum*), for formerly its rulers had called themselves only “prince” or “chief” (*rubu’um*), “lord” (*belum*) or, in inscriptions, “viceroy of the god Ashur.” Shamshi-Adad appointed his heir, Ishme-Dagan, to rule his old capital, Ekallatum, as his viceroy. Then, when the king of Mari was murdered around 1796 BCE, Shamshi-Adad took advantage of the ensuing confusion to capture the city and install his younger son, Yasmah-Adad, as vassal king of the city and its extensive territory. Shamshi-Adad’s kingdom then embraced virtually all of northern Mesopotamia (see [Map 6.2](#)). Later in his reign, he moved to a new, centrally located capital called Shubat-Enlil (modern Tell Leilan) and allowed Ishme-Dagan to become vassal ruler of Ashur. As a result of Shamshi-Adad’s conquests, the Assyrian system of dating by keeping lists of *limmu* officials (or eponyms) whose names were used as year names spread to Mari and other parts of the empire.

Archaeologists rediscovered Mari in 1933 CE in Syria after peasants digging a grave on a hill called Tell Hariri came upon a stone statue. Excavations there have continued to the present and have uncovered remains from Early Dynastic times into the first millennium BCE. The finds include the largest and best preserved Bronze Age palace from the entire Near East, given its final form by the Amorite king Zimri-Lim around 1775 BCE. This was a lavish and richly decorated palace which inspired admiration from other kings of the time. Within the palace archaeologists have found more than 20,000 letters belonging to the time of Shamshi-Adad and Hammurabi, many of them exchanges between Shamshi-Adad and his son, Yasmah-Adad. These not only provide valuable information on government, diplomacy, society, and religion (see the section on Old Babylonian Cultural Developments below), but also give us insight into the personal relationships between Shamshi-Adad and his sons (Heimpel 2003). Shamshi-Adad frequently criticized his younger son, Yasmah-Adad, who seems to have been a poor administrator, and often berated him in humiliating fashion. The old king also worsened the natural sibling rivalry between his two sons by boasting about Ishme-Dagan and comparing Yasmah-Adad to him. Obviously these letters irritated Yasmah-Adad. On one occasion, he angrily repeated his father’s frequent harangue:

I have received and read the letter that you sent me. It reads as follows: “How long will it

be necessary for us continually to guide you? Are you a child and not a man? Don't you have a beard on your chin? How much longer will you be incapable of administering your own household? Don't you see your brother commanding far-flung armies? Now, [let's see] you govern your palace and your household!" *That* is what you wrote to me!

(Dossin 1950: 182–183, translation by W. Stiebing)

Ishme-Dagan also occasionally criticized his younger brother, and even when he offers to help Yasmah-Adad, it is not clear that his motives are altogether altruistic. For example, he advises Yasmah-Adad:

Do not write to the king [Shamshi-Adad, our father]. The country where I reside is nearer the capital city. The things you want to write to the king, write to me, so that I can advise you.

(Roux 1992: 192 with material in brackets added by W. Stiebing)

If Yasmah-Adad followed that advice, then Ishme-Dagan effectively enlarged his own authority and the scope of his administration.

Hammurabi and His Successors

Meanwhile, Hammurabi³ had become king of Babylon (see [Table 6.1](#)). Babylon was a small town mentioned for the first time during the reign of Shar-kali-sharri (c. 2217–2193 BCE). Originally it probably was called Babil or Babila, a non-Semitic name whose meaning is unknown. But Akkadian-speakers called it *Bab-ilim* (“gateway of the god”) and much later *Bab-ilani* (“gateway of the gods”), which became the basis of the Greek *Babulon* and our Babylon. An Amorite chieftain, Sumu-abum, became its ruler around 1894 BCE, but it remained a small, relatively insignificant city-state until the time of Hammurabi (c. 1792–1750 BCE, see [Figure 6.1](#)).



Figure 6.1 A King from the Old Babylonian Period (Possibly Hammurabi)

This portrait, found at Susa where it was taken by Elamites, resembles that of Hammurabi on his Law Stele, though it may be any Old Babylonian king. The naturalistic face, even suggesting worry, parallels the new emphasis on the ruler as shepherd of the people.
© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Early in his reign, Hammurabi seems to have made an alliance with Shamshi-Adad, probably becoming his vassal. The protection this treaty afforded allowed him to extend his kingdom considerably. In his fifth and sixth years, he took Isin and Uruk from Rim-Sin of Larsa, and then probably signed a treaty with Rim-Sin to stabilize Babylonian relations with Larsa. In his tenth

year, he occupied a key city in the territory between the Tigris and the Zagros, and in his eleventh year he captured Rapiqum, a city north of Sippar. He then concentrated his attention on Babylon's internal affairs, waiting for his opportunity to extend his borders again.

When Shamshi-Adad and Yasmah-Adad both died (probably in a battle) around 1776 BCE, the situation changed dramatically. Zimri-Lim ("[the god] Lim Is My Protection"), son of a former king of Mari, easily regained control of his father's city and northern Mesopotamia and Syria once again broke up into rival city states. Hammurabi then formed an alliance with Zimri-Lim to keep Mari from falling to the kings of Eshnunna and Elam who were casting covetous eyes in that direction. A frequently quoted report sent to Zimri-Lim by one of his officials summed up the situation at that time:

There is no king who by himself is strongest. Ten or fifteen kings follow Hammurabi of Babylon, as many follow Rim-Sin of Larsa, Ibal-pi-El of Eshnunna and Amut-pi-El of Qatna, while twenty kings follow Yarim-Lim of Yamhad [Aleppo].

(Dossin 1938: 117, translation by W. Stiebing)

The Mari letters provide evidence not only about the diplomacy these kings practiced, but also about their intelligence services. Even while allies, Zimri-Lim of Mari and Hammurabi of Babylon had intelligence agents (spies) in each other's cities keeping them abreast of important developments. These agents describe troop movements, pending alliances, and other interesting information, some of it presumably secret. For example, one of Zimri-Lim's agents was able to detail to his king the contents of an exchange of letters between Rim-Sin and Hammurabi. Another seems to have become a confidant of Hammurabi, for he informs Zimri-Lim that:

Whenever some matter perturbs Hammurabi, he always sends for me, and I go to him wherever he is. He tells me whatever is troubling him, and all of the important information that he tells me I continually report to my lord.

(Jean 1950: letter 31, translation by W. Stiebing)

In Hammurabi's twenty-ninth year (c. 1764 BCE), a coalition army led by Elam and Eshnunna invaded Babylonian territory, but he defeated these troops. This victory may have convinced him he was now strong enough to move to the offensive. The following year, he attacked Rim-Sin, conquered Larsa, and added all southern Mesopotamia to his kingdom. Then, when Eshnunna and the Elamites attacked again (c. 1762 BCE), he defeated them once more, and afterward, thrust northward and conquered Eshnunna. Because his ally, Zimri-Lim, did not aid him in the conflict with Eshnunna, Hammurabi attacked Mari and forced Zimri-Lim to become his vassal. When Mari rebelled two years later, Hammurabi's armies returned and destroyed the city (c. 1758 BCE).

Finally, in his thirty-sixth and thirty-eighth years of reign (c. 1757 and 1755 BCE), Hammurabi defeated Assyria and seems to have made Ishme-Dagan into a vassal. Between these two campaigns, he also destroyed Eshnunna, diverting water over its ruins. These conquests created an empire that rivaled the size of the Ur III domain (see [Map 6.2](#)).

Hammurabi proved to be as good an administrator as he was a general. His kingdom was governed efficiently and fairly. He chose to portray himself as the favorite of the gods who was devoted to justice. His second year name (for his first full year in power) proclaimed that he “established justice in his land,” and later he dedicated a statue of himself as “King of Justice.” This theme was repeated through the image atop his well-known *Code of Hammurabi* stele (see [Figure 6.2](#)) and in the prologue and epilogue to the so-called *Code*. He placed this stele in a major temple (and probably had copies of it in other temples also) so that anyone longing for justice could consult it and understand his legal situation:

Any person feeling wronged in a legal matter should go in front of the statue of me as “King of Justice” and also have my inscribed stela read out to him so that he can hear my precious words and my stela can explain the case to him.

(Sasson 1995a: 907–908)

The *Code* was written in an archaic script that even people who were literate probably would have had difficulty reading. Presumably the statements quoted earlier were more ideological than literal.



[Figure 6.2](#) Hammurabi’s Law Stele

6.2a: The Stele. 6.2b: The top of the stele depicting Hammurabi in a gesture of prayer or devotion before Shamash, god of justice. Shamash is handing him what may be a measuring rod and reel, the tools of justice.

6.2a: © Franck Raux, RMN/Art Resource, New York. 6.2b: © Alfredo Degli Orti/Art Resource, New York.

Hammurabi raised Babylon to such prominence that, for eras after his time, modern scholars usually refer to all of southern Mesopotamia as Babylonia rather than Sumer and Akkad. But the empire he created proved to be as fragile as earlier ones in Mesopotamia. His dynasty lasted another 155 years, but the extensive empire barely outlived his successor. Hammurabi's son, Samsu-iluna (c. 1749–1712 BCE) had to face challenges from several groups at the same time: Kassites from the Zagros mountains, Rim-Sin II of Larsa (nephew of Hammurabi's foe), and the emerging power of the Sealand, a new kingdom that had arisen in the marshes where the Tigris and Euphrates flow into the Persian Gulf. The Babylonian king defeated a Kassite invasion and after a few years, crushed the rebellion of Rim-Sin II, killing him in the process. For reasons unknown, many of the former cultural centers of the south such as Ur and Nipper were largely abandoned at this time, and a new dynasty of “Sealand” kings established themselves in the marshes of Sumer. Even so, Samsu-iluna managed to hold on to most of the territory Hammurabi had bequeathed him. But soon after his death, Babylon lost Mari and the middle Euphrates region to the Kassite rulers of the new kingdom of Hana. The slow but steady decline continued under the dynasty's last four kings (see [Table 6.1](#)), until Samsu-ditana (c. 1625–1595 BCE) controlled little more than the central part of Mesopotamia, the area around Babylon itself. Then disaster struck in the form of a Hittite raid. The **Hittites**, an Indo-European-speaking people from Anatolia (described more fully later in this chapter), conquered and looted Babylon around 1595 BCE and brought the dynasty of Hammurabi to an end. Soon afterward, the Kassites occupied Babylon.

Old Babylonian Cultural Developments

Literature

The Old Babylonian Period (or the “Age of Hammurabi,” as it is often called) is one of the best documented in Mesopotamian history. We have already mentioned the extensive collection of trade documents found at Kanesh in

Anatolia and the thousands of letters from Mari. In addition, there are many surviving building inscriptions, lists of year names, a chronicle, fragments of Lipit-Ishtar's "law code" and the laws of Eshnunna, Hammurabi's virtually intact "law code," hundreds of Hammurabi's letters, and various collections of private and public documents from several other sites. To these must be added recently discovered tablets from Shamshi-Adad's capital, Shubat-Enlil. Later copies and translations of writings from this time are also very valuable.

This era was the classical period for the Akkadian language and grammar and for the development of Akkadian literature. Though Sumerian continued to be studied in schools, it was rarely, if ever, spoken. However, Sumerian myths and epics were translated into Akkadian or rewritten as Akkadian compositions based upon Sumerian originals. The most important of these new compositions was the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (or *Surpassing All Other Kings*, its title in the Old Babylonian Period). The Old Babylonian author of this epic utilized five earlier Sumerian poems, weaving the older stories into a unified work praising Gilgamesh as the greatest of all heroes, but also dealing with one of the most basic human concerns, the fear of aging and death and the desire to escape them. It gives eloquent expression to the age-old Mesopotamian fatalism—"when the gods created humans, they decreed death for mankind; life they retained for themselves."

At the beginning of the story, Gilgamesh is a brash young king of Uruk who tyrannizes his people, leading the gods to send a creature named Enkidu to kill him. Enkidu is a very powerful, hairy, wild man-like creature that runs with the animals and eats grass like the gazelles. To weaken him, Gilgamesh posts a prostitute at a watering hole near Uruk with instructions for her to seduce Enkidu. When he arrived, she persuaded him to have sex with her and then took him to a shepherds' camp where she introduced him to bread, beer, baths, and perfumed oils. Enkidu is still determined to fight Gilgamesh, but now Gilgamesh was the stronger of the two. During the struggle each came to admire the other's strength, and even though Enkidu eventually had to accept Gilgamesh's supremacy, he and Gilgamesh became strong friends. They then went on adventures together, triumphing over the monster Huwawa (Humbaba in the later Standard Version), guardian of the Cedar Forest (see [Figure 6.3](#)). But the gods decree that Enkidu should die, so, he became terminally ill. Gilgamesh watched helplessly as his friend weakened, died, and his body began to decay. Grief-stricken, Gilgamesh refused to wash, would wear only animal skins, and fled civilization to search for immortality. He made his way to the home of Utnapishtim, a man whom the gods had made immortal after he saved earth's creatures from destruction during the Great Flood. The next part of the story has been lost, but it probably was similar to the later Standard Version. Utnapishtim tries to show Gilgamesh that he

cannot become immortal and challenges him to stay awake for seven days. Gilgamesh fails, and instead falls asleep for seven days. When he awakes, he is forced to recognize the futility of his quest. Reluctantly, he bathed, dressed, and returned to Uruk and civilization, accepting his mortality.



Figure 6.3 Gilgamesh and Enkidu Slaying Huwawa

This terra cotta plaque probably depicts Gilgamesh (on the left) and Enkidu (on the right) battling and killing the monster Huwawa, guardian of the Cedar Forest. Thousands of plaques like these with various scenes of gods and demons were found in private homes in the Old Babylonian Period. They probably served an amuletic purpose.

© Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was edited and modified several times before the “Standard Version” was created around 1200 BCE by a Kassite poet (see the section “Kassite Rule in Baby-lonia” for a description of additions to the poem and changes in emphasis). Copies of this epic poem (or fragments of copies) have been found in Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine as well as at various Mesopotamian sites. Through Anatolian versions it probably influenced the development of Greek traditions about Heracles. Also, its account of the Great Flood probably traveled to Greece through Asia Minor and through Canaanite sources some echoes of the epic’s language and message became embedded in the Bible.

Religion

There were also several significant developments in Mesopotamian religion

during the Old Babylonian Period. The most important was Hammurabi's elevation of Marduk, patron god of Babylon, to supremacy over the Mesopotamian pantheon. To make this change acceptable to Mesopotamians outside of Babylon, Hammurabi claimed that Anu and Enlil, the old supreme gods, raised Marduk above the other great gods and gave him Enlil's functions. Marduk also assumed the title *Bel* ("Lord") adopted for Enlil during the Akkadian Period, and this appellation frequently came to be used in place of Marduk's name. Also, when Sumerian myths were rewritten in Akkadian during this time, Marduk was simply substituted for Enlil.

A creation story called the *Epic of Creation* (or in Akkadian *Enuma Elish*, "When on High"), probably was produced during the Old Babylonian Period (though some would place its composition in the Kassite era) to exalt Marduk as King of the Gods. The epic calls Marduk "the Enlil of the gods," suggesting to some that Enlil may have been the hero in an earlier version of the story. Thus, it may have had Sumerian roots, but if there was a Sumerian version of this myth, it has not yet been found. According to this epic, sexual relations between the male Abzu (the freshwater ocean) and female Tiamat (the saltwater ocean) led to the birth of the gods. Abzu decided to destroy the gods, but Enki killed him, thus becoming ruler of the fresh waters. However, Tiamat was enraged at Abzu's death and planned to exterminate her divine children. A council of the gods chose one of their number (Marduk according to the Babylonians, but possibly originally Enlil if the story had Sumerian antecedents) to meet the chaotic watery goddess in battle. He defeated Tiamat, cut her carcass in two and used one half as a dome over the sky and the other half as the surface of the earth. The flat earth that floats on and is surrounded by the fresh water ocean (*abzu*) is half of Tiamat's body. Her breasts are the mountains, her insides became the saltwater seas, her spittle results in clouds and rain, and from her eyes flow the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Beneath the surface of the earth (and presumably beneath the thin layer of fresh water on which the earth floats) is the underworld. The other half of Tiamat's body forms a dome enclosing the sky and earth, holding back the primordial sea in which the world floats like a bubble. Clearly the myth had political overtones. After he is established as king, Marduk founds his shrine in the city of Babylon, making it the seat of the assembly of the gods.

Like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Babylonian *Epic of Creation* influenced the myths of many other Near Eastern people, including the Israelites. The biblical Book of Genesis contains two separate creation stories that most Assyriologists and biblical scholars agree ultimately derived from Mesopotamia. The earlier of the two accounts (Genesis 2:4b-25, placed second in the Bible by later editors) envisions an anthropomorphic deity shaping man from clay. God also plants trees and other vegetation to make a garden in a place called Eden that

is watered by four rivers, two of which are the Tigris and the Euphrates. In the other creation story in Genesis (1:1–2:4a), a demythologized version of the conflict between the creator and a chaotic sea, God creates the universe by his words alone. Like Mesopotamian cosmology, this account envisions the earth floating on water and surmounted by a solid dome of sky (the “firmament”) that holds back “the waters above the firmament.” Moreover, the word *tehom* in this account, usually translated “the deep,” is the Hebrew linguistic equivalent of Akkadian “Tiamat.” Other Bible passages show that the ancient Israelites knew (almost certainly through Canaanite sources) and generally accepted the older version of this story in which creation takes place only after God fights and kills a chaotic sea monster or dragon (see [Chapter 13](#)).

During the Old Babylonian Period, Mesopotamian study and recording of heavenly bodies’ movements began to become a bit more systematic. A famous series of observations of the rising of the planet Venus, dated to the reign of Ammisaduqa (c. 1646–1626 BCE), has allowed modern scholars to provide absolute dates for this era. As stated in the introduction, the cyclical nature of astronomical events makes three different Old Babylonian chronologies (designated High, Middle, and Low) possible. The dates used in this chapter and in most historical works follow the Middle Chronology.

The Old Babylonian Period also has yielded the earliest known examples of Mesopotamian omen literature. To try to understand the will of the gods, the Mesopotamians devised several methods of divination—reading or interpreting divine omens or portents. The most important Mesopotamian method of divination from Old Babylonian times onward was extispicy in which a young ram was sacrificed and its liver (or occasionally other organs) examined. Spots, folds, or other unusual features meant different things depending on where they were located. Other early methods of divination included observing the pattern made by oil when poured on water or the behavior of smoke rising from burning incense. One or more of these divination procedures was used before all major undertakings such as building temples, embarking on military campaigns, or performing special religious rites. Later types of divination include noting events associated with chance happenings or unusual natural phenomena (especially in the heavens), interpretation of dreams, and observation of the activities of birds (see Starr et al. 1990: especially xiii–lxxv).

Mesopotamian temples and their staffs had gradually grown larger since Early Dynastic times, and many categories of cultic personnel are listed in Hammurabi’s *Code* and other documents from this era. An interesting class of women attached to some temples was called *naditum*. These women lived in a “cloister” within the temple compound, and could marry, but were not allowed to bear children. They were of high social status, often held royal land, and usually engaged in various business operations such as lending wheat or silver

to individuals, financing trading ventures, or buying and renting out houses and land. Two other groups of temple functionaries mentioned for the first time in this era were males and females who engaged in ritual sex. The males may have been passive homosexuals, possibly eunuchs (castrates), though some think they were only dancers and musicians whose profession made them seem effeminate to other men (Rubio 2001: 270). In the temples of Ishtar, goddess of carnal love, and possibly in other temples as well, these consecrated men and women apparently performed sexual acts with male worshippers as part of the sacred rites (Roux 1992: 213–214; Black and Green 1998: 150–151; Beard and Henderson 1998; Budin 2006). The money obtained from these cultic sexual acts went into the temple treasury. Such ritual sex was practiced in other parts of the Near East as well, including early Israel (Deuteronomy 23:17–18, verses 18–19 in Hebrew; 1 Kings 14:24; 22:46, verse 47 in Hebrew; Hosea 4:14; see [Chapter 13](#)).

Also interesting are references at Mari to divine messages delivered through ordinary citizens. Of course, Mesopotamia had professional diviners, soothsayers, seers, and other religious officials who provided information from the gods through omens and other means. However, the Mari letters indicate that the gods sometimes chose to give their messages (usually in dreams) to individuals who were not part of the religious establishment. In one instance, a governor tells King Zimri-Lim that a man reported a dream in which Dagan, a weather and grain god introduced into Mesopotamia by the Amorites, spoke to him in Dagan's temple in Terqa, a city on the Euphrates about fifty miles north-northwest of Mari. Many scholars see in these texts parallels with pre-exilic Israelite and Judean prophets who delivered messages from God to their society, often chastising religious leaders and kings. The Aramaeans and Phoenicians also had similar beliefs about prophets, suggesting that these ideas were native to West Semitic peoples and were introduced into Mesopotamia by the Amorites.

Debating the Evidence: The “Code” of Hammurabi

The *Code of Hammurabi* is one of the best-known documents from ancient Mesopotamia, but there has been a long-standing debate about its nature and purpose. Was it really intended to be an authoritative code of laws as the name generally given to it indicates? Most scholars agree with Georges Roux (1992: 202) that “the word ‘Code’ is misleading, since we are not confronted here with a thorough legislative reform, nor with an exhaustive corpus of logically arranged legal dispositions, such as Justinian’s *Institutes* or Napoleon’s *Code*

Civil.” Moreover, in the legal documents that have survived, judges do not mention the *Code* as the basis for their decisions, even when the cases they are deciding are similar to ones listed on the stele. One possible exception to this rule is a citation in a contract from Ur:

The [amount of] wages for a hired worker is written on the stele, [therefore] in accordance with what they told you, do not withhold their wages, be it barley or silver.

(Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 1, 112)

However, there is no clear indication that the stele referred to is Hammurabi’s “Law” Stele, though some think it probably is.

Mesopotamian courts seem to have functioned under a kind of common law system based on basic principles of justice and the judges’ common sense. Occasionally, though, kings had to issue special edicts covering specific situations, for example, remitting debts or fixing prices of some commodities. Also, during a king’s reign the ruler might have to decide some isolated cases for which no precedents existed or to modify some former laws. Some scholars argue that Hammurabi’s *Code* and earlier “law codes” probably were compiled from such royal legal edicts and royal decisions on individual cases.

These royal decisions (*dīnat sharrim*), duly recorded and eventually collected together to be used for reference by the judges of future generations, formed the so-called “Codes of Law,” and we possess several such copies of the Code of Hammurabi on clay tablets, ranging from the Old Babylonian period to the time of the Chaldean dynasty (sixth century BCE).

(Roux 1992: 203)

Other Assyriologists disagree, arguing that the *Code of Hammurabi* was primarily an educational tool for training scribes. They claim that this and other “law codes” were essentially academic tractates on law used to train the scribes who would become Mesopotamia’s judges and legal experts. According to this view, the hypothetical cases listed on the stele were not selected from actual cases that had come before the law courts or based on reality at all. Instead, they were created by the hypothetico-deductive method used to produce other scholarly works such as omen lists and astronomical texts. The *Code* was designed by master scribes “who drew from its pristine rhetoric fine exercises for advanced students” (Sasson 1995a: 908).⁴

Finally, some scholars view the *Code* mainly as royal propaganda. As Marc Van De Mieroop states (2016: 121), “it is not a code of law but a monument presenting Hammurabi as an exemplary king of justice.” According to this view, the *Code*, produced near the end of the reign, was intended for two audiences. It demonstrated to the people of Hammurabi’s time that justice would ultimately prevail and that the king was performing his duty to protect

the weak and powerless. It was also intended to serve as a guide for the rule of future kings (Van de Mieroop 2005: 110–111). It might be added that, because copies of the stele seem to have been placed in temples in several Babylonian cities, it was meant to show the gods that Hammurabi was fulfilling his responsibilities as their viceroy. It would also have assured the people that if they were injured, Hammurabi guaranteed that justice would be done (Van De Mieroop 2016: 134). However, the *Code* would have served no practical purpose in the Babylonian legal system or had much direct effect on the day-to-day lives of ordinary people (see, e.g., Finkelstein 1961; Westbrook 1985, 1989).

Which view is correct? As Jack Sasson points out (1995a: 908),

there is no simple answer, and the same debate can be raised about most legal formulations from antiquity, including what is found in the Hebrew Bible, for there is no easy match between our vocabulary and our principles of law and those of the Mesopotamians.

(For more detailed analyses of Mesopotamian “law codes” see Westbrook 1985, 1989; Ver-Steeg 2000; Westbrook and Jasnow 2003.) One thing almost everyone agrees upon, though, is that the *Code of Hammurabi* is an extremely useful document for understanding Old Babylonian society and customs.

Babylonian Society and Customs in the Code

Though many private letters, contracts, and other documents survive from this time, if Hammurabi’s “Law” Stele (see [Document 6.1](#)) reflects reality at all (and the assumption that it does seems to be supported by surviving texts from legal proceedings), it is our greatest single source of information about Old Babylonian society. The stele indicates that Mesopotamian society was stratified into three classes at Hammurabi’s time: *awilum*, *mushkenum*, and *wardum*. *Wardum* means “slave” (or sometimes “servant”), obviously the lowest level on the social scale, but the meaning of the other two words is not certain. The word *mush-kenum* literally means “one who prostrates himself,” suggesting subservience to another person or institution. Its cognates (linguistically related words) in other Semitic languages mean “pauper” or “commoner,” and members of this class clearly are inferior to those of the *awilum* class. They probably were dependents of the palace or of nobles, working as tenant farmers on their lands. *Awilum* literally means “man” and sometimes can refer to a man of any class, even a slave. On other occasions, it can mean any *free* man, but as a class designation, it seems to refer to a member of the elite, probably a landowner or noble. Some of the items (or judgments) listed on Hammurabi’s stele distinguish between *awilum* and “son of an *awilum*,” so it is likely that in most instances the word *awilum* means

“free man,” including members of the *mushkenum* class. “Son of an *awilum*” probably means “member of the *awilum* class” (i.e., a “gentleman,” one of the elite). So, Items 196 to 198 (see [Document 6.1](#)) probably mean:

If a free man has put out the eye of a member of the elite, they shall put out his eye. If a free man has broken the bone of a member of the elite, they shall break his bone. If a free man has destroyed the eye of a commoner or broken a commoner’s bone, he shall pay one mina of silver.

Document 6.1 Selected Items from Hammurabi’s Stele

Since the word *awilum* is used in all three of its senses in the *Code* and since we cannot really be sure what a *mushkenum* was, the words have not been translated here to allow the reader to note the distinctions and ambiguities for himself or herself. Modern scholars have numbered the items (usually called “laws,” though it is not certain that is what they were); the numbers are not found in the original text. This translation is by W. Stiebing. For a translation of the entire “*Code*,” see Richardson (2000).

1. If an *awilum* has accused another *awilum* of homicide but has not proved his guilt, the accuser shall be put to death.

2. If an *awilum* has accused another *awilum* of sorcery, but has not proved his guilt, the person accused of sorcery shall go to the river and plunge into it. If the river overcomes him, his accuser shall take his estate. If the river proves that *awilum* innocent and he returns unharmed, the one who brought the charge of sorcery against him shall be put to death and the one who jumped into the river shall take the estate of his accuser.

9. If an *awilum* who has lost some property has discovered that lost property in another *awilum*’s possession, but the *awilum* in whose possession the lost property was found has stated, “a seller sold it to me; I bought it before witnesses,” and the owner of the lost property has said, “I will produce witnesses who know it is my lost property,” (and then) the buyer has produced the seller who sold (the property) to him and the witnesses before whom he bought it and the owner of the lost property (also) has produced witnesses who know the lost property, the judges shall examine their statements and the witnesses before whom the property was bought and the witnesses who know the lost property shall state what they know in the presence of god. Then, the seller is a thief; he shall be put to death. The owner of the lost property shall take his lost property. The buyer shall take the money he has paid from the estate of the seller.

129. If an *awilum*'s wife has been caught copulating with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king may also spare his subject.

131. If an *awilum*'s wife has been accused by her husband, but she was not caught copulating with another man, she shall swear (her innocence) by a solemn oath and return to her house.

132. If a finger has been pointed at an *awilum*'s wife because of another man, but she was not caught copulating with the other man, she shall leap into the river (and undergo the water ordeal) for the sake of her husband.

134. If an *awilum* has been made prisoner and there is nothing to eat in his house, his wife may enter another man's house; that woman shall suffer no punishment.

142. If a woman so hates her husband that she states "you may not have (sex with) me," her record shall be investigated in her district, and if she has kept herself chaste and was not at fault, while her husband has been going out and has greatly maligned her, that woman shall suffer no punishment; she may take her dowry and return to her father's house.

196–197. If an *awilum* has put out the eye of a son of an *awilum*, they shall put out his eye. If an *awilum* has broken the bone of an *awilum*, they shall break his bone.

198. If an *awilum* has destroyed the sight of a *mushkenum* or broken a *mushkenum*'s bone, he shall pay one mina of silver.

199. If an *awilum* has destroyed the sight of an *awilum*'s slave or broken the bone of an *awilum*'s slave, he shall pay half the slave's value in silver.

202–203. If an *awilum* has struck the cheek of an *awilum* who is superior (in rank) to himself [or, possibly, "older than himself"], he shall be struck sixty times with an oxtail whip in the assembly. If an *awilum* has struck the cheek of an *awilum* equal (in rank) [or, perhaps, "in age"] to himself, he shall pay one mina of silver.

204. If a *mushkenum* has struck the cheek of a *mushkenum*, he shall pay ten shekels of silver.

215. If a physician has made a deep incision on an *awilum* with a bronze scalpel and has saved the *awilum*'s life, or he opened an eye infection of an *awilum* with a bronze scalpel and has saved the *awilum*'s eye, he shall receive ten shekels of silver.

218. If a surgeon has made a deep incision on an *awilum* with a bronze scalpel and has caused the *awilum*'s death, or he opened an eye infection of an *awilum* and has destroyed the *awilum*'s eye, they shall cut off his hand.

229–230. If a builder has constructed a house for an *awilum* but has not made his work strong enough and the house that he built has collapsed and caused the death of the house's owner, that builder shall be killed. If it has caused the death of the owner's son, they shall kill the builder's son.

Individuals had to prove any accusations they made or suffer the consequences (Document 6.1, Item 1), unless the charge was sorcery (Item 2). Because it might be difficult for an accuser to obtain evidence against a true sorcerer, the river ordeal was used in those cases. The person accused of sorcery had to jump into a river and the gods decided guilt or innocence by drowning the accused or by allowing him or her to swim to the other side. Crimes against persons were punished differently, depending upon the class of the victims, as Items 196 through 199 show. Injuries to members of the upper class were punished by direct retribution (“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”) to guarantee that the punishment fit the crime. On the other hand, crimes committed against those of lesser status were punished only by fines.

There seems to have been a deliberate effort to protect women and children from the arbitrary treatment and abuse possible in a patriarchal society. For example, a woman who had to take refuge with another man in her husband's absence (due to imprisonment or captivity) because he had left her with nothing to eat did not incur a penalty (Item 134). A husband who divorced his wife because she did not bear him sons not only had to return the dowry she brought into the marriage from her family, but also give her the amount of money he had given her parents as her bridal price (Item 138). If there was no bridal price, a member of the upper class must give the former wife a mina of silver (Item 139) and a *mushkenum* one-third of a mina of silver (Item 140). Moreover, though a husband of a diseased woman was permitted to take another wife, he had to keep the diseased wife in his house and provide for her as long as she lived (Item 148). Also, the faithful wife of a husband who had been disparaging her outside of the house had the right to refuse him sex and even to end the marriage (Item 142). Children inherited their mother's dowry as well as property from their father (Items 162 and 167), and a father could not disinherit a son who had not committed at least two serious offences (Items 168 and 169).

An interesting feature of Mesopotamia's economic system is that prices that could be charged for some goods and services were fixed by custom or royal decree, but at the same time, the work carried a warranty. If a person had a boat caulked, and the boat leaked within a year, the boatman who did the caulking had to redo it at his own expense (Item 235). If a house or wall

collapsed because of poor workmanship by the builder, the builder had to pay for repairs and for any of the owner's property that was damaged (Item 232–233), and if someone was killed by the collapse, the builder or a member of his family would likewise be killed (see Item 229). Unfortunately, Mesopotamians treated medicine as a craft, so surgeons were responsible if an operation did not succeed or if the patient died (Item 218). This approach undoubtedly hindered the development of surgery in Mesopotamia and encouraged doctors to rely more on magical incantations and internal medicine than surgical procedures to cure illness.

The Hittite Old Kingdom

Not long after the consolidation of Babylonia under Hammurabi and his successors, similar developments were taking place in Anatolia where a people known to us as the Hittites established a strong centralized state. Within a century these Hittite kings not only conquered and unified their home territory within central Anatolia, but swept through Syria and on to Babylon, putting an end to the era of Babylonian supremacy.

Debating the Evidence: Indo-European Origins

Who were the Hittites who had burst into prominence so suddenly with their conquest of Babylon? When, early in the twentieth century CE the Hittite language was first discovered written in cuneiform signs on tablets from Amarna in Egypt and Boğazköy (Hattusa) in Turkey, it could not be read. However, in 1915, Bedřich Hrozný demonstrated that it was an early member of the Indo-European language family. Scholars designated this language and the people who spoke it “Hittite,” because the land where these people lived was called Hatti in various ancient texts, and other ancient nations used “Hatti” to designate the inhabitants, as well. Moreover, the Bible had mentioned a powerful people called the Hittites. However, we now know that these so-called Hittites retained an older name, “Hatti,” for their kingdom, but they did not call themselves Hittites. They termed their own language “Nesite” or “Nesian” (*neshili*, “in the language of Nesa”) after the city of Nesa or Nesha (Kanesh), one of their early capitals in Anatolia. They used the designation “Hittite” (or *hattili*, “in the language of Hatti”) for the non-Indo-European tongue of the previous population of the area (the people we now call

Hattians).

Our earliest evidence for an Indo-European tongue in the Near East comes from the tablets of the Assyrian merchants who lived at Kanesh in Anatolia around 2000 to 1900. Many Indo-European personal names appear in these records, so Indo-European groups must have been present in central Anatolia by the beginning of the second millennium BCE, at the latest. It is generally assumed (but see later) that these Indo-Europeans were foreigners who migrated into Anatolia at some point in the past. So, where did they come from? Scholars once almost universally believed that the original Indo-European homeland was on the steppes of southern Russia or in the Ukraine, and some still hold this view (Gimbutas 1985; Anthony 2007: 98–101; see further below). Others have argued that the Indo-Europeans originated in the Balkans (Diakonov 1985; Steiner 1990), while others believe they were indigenous to central Anatolia (Renfrew 1988). All the Indo-European languages and dialects share words concerning agriculture and the domestication of animals. So, the argument goes, the earliest Indo-European speakers were agriculturalists, not seminomadic herders, and their language must have originated in an area that experienced the Neolithic Revolution. Thus, these scholars favor the view that Proto-Indo-European, the common tongue from which the various Indo-European languages descended, developed in the area between the Black and Caspian Seas and between the Caucasus Mountains and northern Mesopotamia (e.g., Drews 1988: 32–35; Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1995). This is essentially the area of ancient Armenia (which is now northeastern Turkey, the Republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and the northwestern tip of Iran).

While it is true that the speakers of Proto-Indo-European were farmers, their vocabulary indicates that they also had a tribal society, herded cattle and sheep, collected honey from honeybees, made wool textiles, drove wagons, and occasionally sacrificed sheep, cattle, and horses to sky gods (Anthony 2007: 98). David W. Anthony argues that the area that best fits this list of cultural items is north of the Caucasus Mountains, not south of them. He places the Proto-Indo-European homeland where it traditionally had been located, between the Ural Mountains and the Caucasus in the steppes of eastern Ukraine and southwestern Russia. Moreover, he claims that the internal coherence of the reconstructed language indicates that it existed for less than two thousand years and probably for less than one thousand years. Using vocabulary and archaeology as his guides, Anthony concludes (2007: 99) that “the heart of the Proto-Indo-European period probably fell between 4000 and 3000 BCE, with an early phase that might go back to 4500 BCE and a late phase that ended by 2500 BCE.” So, in his view, the Proto-Indo-European speakers did know agriculture, but their language developed long after the Neolithic Revolution.

A new approach to this question using statistical analyses seems to support Renfrew’s Anatolian hypothesis. A team of researchers using computer modeling techniques taken from the fields of genetics and epidemiology have concluded that the origins of Proto-Indo-European date to 7,000–9,000 years ago in Anatolia, precisely the time of the Neolithic Revolution (Bouckaert et al. 2012). Unfortunately, this approach has been rejected by most linguists. Scholars are thus still at an impasse in locating an *Urheimat* or “homeland” for the original Indo-Europeans.

What we can be certain of is that subfamilies of Indo-European had already developed by the end of the third millennium BCE. The Anatolian family of Indo-European (including Hittite, Luwian, Palaic, and later Lycian and Lydian) seems to have been one of the earliest languages to branch off from the Proto-Indo-European. Sometime later groups speaking another branch became the ancestors of the European language families (Celtic, Italic, Germanic, Baltic, and Slavic). Other groups from the second branch became the speakers of Proto-Armenian, Proto-Greek, and Indo-Iranian (which diverged into Median, Persian, Sanskrit, and other languages) (see [Figure 6.4](#)). Most groups seem to have moved west (or south, then west) while the Indo-Iranians moved east and south.

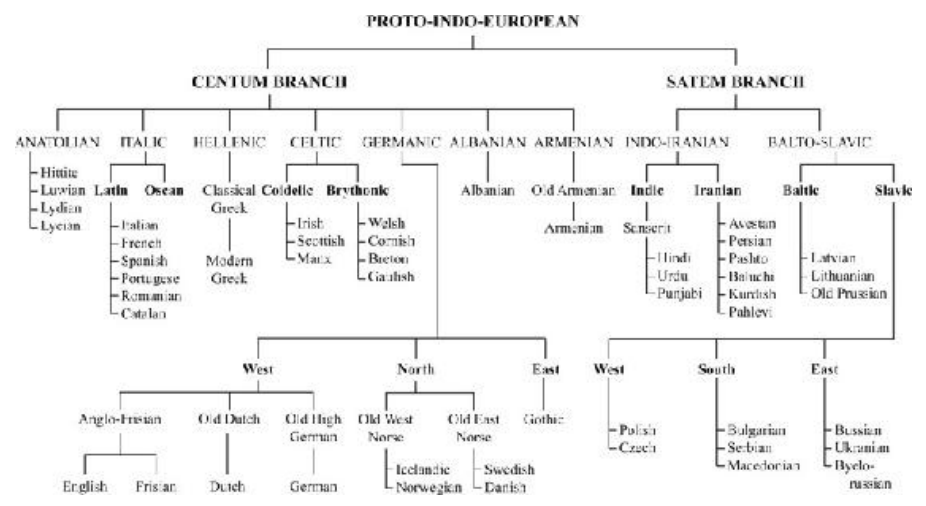


Figure 6.4 Simplified Chart of the Indo-European Language Family

Not all languages and stages of development are represented. Illyrian, Thracian, and Phrygian are not listed; their placement is uncertain. Although there are many debates about when the language branches broke off from one another, the Anatolian group is generally acknowledged as one of the earliest daughter branches.

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

At present, we cannot date these early movements with any confidence.

Some scholars think that speakers of Indo-European languages were already present in Anatolia well before the Early Bronze Age (Renfrew 1988: 145–175, 263–277). In fact, some argue that there is no reason to assume that they were not always there (e.g., Van de Mieroop 2016: 128). However, the linguistic evidence seems to indicate that the Proto-Anatolian branch of Indo-European was introduced into Anatolia when a predominantly Hattic-speaking population dominated that area. So Proto-Indo-European probably did not originate there. Moreover, since Proto-Indo-European has words for wagons, axles, and wheels, Proto-Anatolian could not have broken off from the mother tongue before c. 4000–3500 BCE, when those items were first developed (Anthony 2007: 63–81).

Thus, other scholars argue that there were migrations of Indo-European speaking groups *into* Anatolia. Some of them also conclude that the initial movements that brought the Proto-Greek speakers into Greece and the Proto-Anatolian speakers into Asia Minor *probably* occurred as part of the turmoil and destruction that swept over the eastern Mediterranean area at the end of the Early Bronze Age around 2200 BCE (Macquoen 1986: 26, 32; Bryce 2005: 14 item 10). Migrating Indo-European groups have been credited with destroying the settlements in Greece and Anatolia that were sacked and abandoned at this time, but this view has been strongly attacked (Hooker 1999). As we have seen, this seems to have been a time of weather change and drought. The deteriorating environment possibly forced some speakers of Indo-European tongues to move as the migration theory holds, but it also probably would have caused much local conflict and devastation in the eastern Mediterranean region. Even if a migration took place around 2200 BCE, the invaders probably did not cause all of the destruction. Today, there is no consensus about when and how Indo-European languages came to be spoken in Asia Minor and Greece. All we can say for certain is that by about 2000 to 1900 BCE, Hittite and Luwian speakers were present in Asia Minor.⁵ It is not as certain, but it is probable that by that time an Indo-European language was being spoken in most of Greece. Moreover, it is clear that the speech of these groups already had developed into the Hittite, Luwian, and Palaic languages on the one hand and Greek on the other.

It is also possible that around 1700 BCE, chariot-using Indo-Iranian speakers migrated into eastern Iran and India, causing the mysterious cultural collapse in Central Asia, eastern Iran, and the Indus valley. However, as we have seen, there is little direct evidence to support that theory except for Vedic tradition and the fact that by c. 1000 BCE people in India and in much of Iran spoke related Indo-European languages. So, while it is very probable that an Indo-Iranian language was introduced into Iran and India sometime during the Bronze Age, we cannot pinpoint how or when.

Robert Drews (1988: 157–188) has revived an old theory linking the Indo-European migrations and conquests with the use of horse-drawn light chariots. We have noted that heavy, solid-wheeled chariots pulled by small donkeys were used in Mesopotamia during the Early Dynastic Period. However, these vehicles were little better than wagons or carts—they were slow, cumbersome, and difficult to steer. In contrast, the agile horse-drawn light chariot with spoked wheels, probably developed around the beginning of the second millennium BCE, changed the nature of warfare (Drews 1988: 102–105; Littauer and Crouwel 1992). Domesticated horses had been known in the Near East much earlier, but their usefulness in warfare could not be exploited without use of the bit. The horse bit is a metallic mouthpiece attached to the bridle and reins. When pulled, it presses against the tender rear parts of the horse's mouth, forcing the animal to accept direction by means of the reins. It probably was introduced into the Near East around 2000 BCE (Anthony 2007: 416), though it may have been used on the Russian steppes at an earlier time. Horse bits allowed chariot drivers to control steeds galloping at top speed, something that was impossible with the nose rings used earlier.

At first, the chariot was just a luxury item used by kings and the very rich for rapid transportation or as a status symbol. During the eighteenth century BCE, it also probably began to be used for hunting. However, by the early part of the seventeenth century BCE, horse-drawn chariots began to be used in warfare. Chariot warfare is first attested in Asia Minor and Syria, but the new tactics quickly spread throughout the Near East and into other areas. Drews (1988: 158–201) connects the spread of chariot warfare with the movement of Indo-European conquerors, arguing that the Greeks only entered Greece c. 1600 BCE, bringing the war chariot with them, and that around the same time, Aryan chariot warriors conquered India, as the *Rig-Veda* claims. However, if there were Indo-European movements into Asia Minor and Greece earlier than 1600 BCE as other scholars contend (e.g., Hooker 1999: 60–61), then the spread of the light war chariot likely was due more to cultural diffusion and the need to match the military innovations of opponents than to Indo-European conquests.⁶

The Emergence of a Hittite State

We actually know little about the development of Hittite power. The Old Assyrian texts from the city of Kanesh give us some idea about the political events of the early second millennium BCE, the precursors to the Hittite state. At this time, central Anatolia was divided into several small kingdoms that

were often at war with one another. Kanesh was the most important of these. At Kanesh we find the first “Hittite” names although Hittite was only one of the languages spoken in the area.

The Hittite rulers who dominated central Anatolia around 1650 to 1590 BCE claimed that their dynasty originated in a city named Kussara, one of Kanesh’s rival kingdoms. They also memorialized the conquests of Pithana, a king of Kussara, who captured Nesa/Kanesh and made it his base of operations. According to a later text, Pithana was kind to the city and made its inhabitants “his mothers and fathers.” The Assyrians continued to occupy the lower city during his and his son, Anitta’s, reign. Anitta greatly expanded his territory through conquest of the surrounding area, including the siege and utter destruction of the town of Hattusa, placing a curse on anyone who resettled it.

In the past, many scholars have seen this war as a conflict between the native Hattians in Zalpa and Hattusa and the newly arrived Indo-European Hittites of Kussara and Nesa/Kanesh. However, there is no real evidence for such strong ethnic consciousness and conflict in Anatolia at this time, and as Trevor Bryce points out, “we do not know from their names alone what the ethnic origins of Pithana and Anitta were” (2005: 36, fn. 84). Though much of the later Anitta text that describes these events is apocryphal, Anitta was a real person, for archaeologists found a spearhead inscribed with his name in the palace at Nesa/Kanesh. These kings may have been ancestors of the later Hittite rulers, though the Hittites never explicitly made that claim. On the other hand, the Hittite rulers eventually reoccupied Hattusa, the city Anitta had cursed, and made it their capital.

The collapse of Anitta’s Nesa-based kingdom and the destruction of Nesa/Kanesh and the Assyrian merchant colony there c. 1710 BCE ended written records in Anatolia for nearly a century. The darkness lifted during the reign of Hattusili I (c. 1650–1620 BCE), the first clearly attested king of the Hittite Old Kingdom (c. 1650–1420 BCE). Hattusili recorded his exploits in annals, using the Old Babylonian script of the south, rather than the Old Assyrian writing that was earlier used in Kanesh. His scribes adapted the Old Babylonian signs to write Hittite for the first time. Hattusili was probably not the founder of his dynasty, for he claims to have succeeded someone named Labarna and mentions a rebellion against his grandfather (Labarna’s father). However, there are no writings from the reigns of these kings (who, like Hattusili, presumably were from Kussara).⁷ At some point in his reign, Hattusili occupied Hattusa and made it his capital. He gained control of most of eastern Anatolia, even crossing the Taurus Mountains and extending his kingdom’s borders to the Mediterranean. He also campaigned against Arzawa in western Asia Minor, an area occupied by Luwians (a people whose Indo-European language was related to Hittite), but this attack was little more than a raid. Hattusili probably

died on a campaign against the kingdom of Yamhad (Aleppo) in northern Syria.

During his reign, Hattusili's greatest challenge had been choosing a successor who would be able to preserve the unity of the kingdom. His sons had rebelled against him and had been removed from the succession. He then adopted his nephew and named him as his successor, but that choice seems to have been unpopular with many members of the landholding aristocracy and threatened more civil war. Because his nephew took no steps to placate and win over his opponents, Hattusili repudiated his adoption. Shortly before his death, Hattusili named his teenaged grandson Mursili as his successor and adopted him. The nobles seem to have accepted this choice and when Hattusili died, Mursili I (c. 1620–1590 BCE) ascended peacefully to the throne.

Mursili (or possibly his regent at first) moved to consolidate his hold over the areas of southern Anatolia conquered by Hattusili. Then, he avenged his grandfather's defeat and death by conquering Aleppo and destroying the kingdom of Yamhad. Now the way was open for the greatest display of Hittite power in Old Kingdom times, the attack on Babylon. Why Mursili undertook an expedition so far from the Hittite homeland is unknown. Perhaps he was just seeking booty or possibly fame to rival that of Sargon of Akkad who was said to have marched from Babylonia deep into Anatolia. Others have suggested that his attack was part of an alliance with the Kassites to put them in power in Babylon so they could act as a check on the growing strength of the Hurrians in Syria. In any case, as we have seen, his campaign was successful.

This long campaign, though, put too much strain on the fragile peace Mursili had created within the Hittite realm. Plots were hatched in his absence, and soon after his return, his brother-in-law assassinated him. This began a period of anarchy, palace murders, and civil war that lasted for several generations. The new kingdom of Mitanni seized the opportunity to conduct several destructive raids into Hittite territory. Also, many former Hittite vassals in Asia Minor revolted. The territory Hittite kings could control effectively contracted to the Hittite homeland surrounding Hattusa, the capital. Conditions improved somewhat when Telepinu (c. 1525–1500 BCE) seized the throne and instituted a law clearly defining the rules of succession. However, though he restored some order at home, Telepinu was unable to reconquer Hatti's former territories. So, it remained only a modest-sized Anatolian kingdom until the advent of the Hittite New Kingdom almost a century later.

The Emergence of Other New Peoples

The Hurrians and the Kingdom of Mitanni

The Hurrians probably originated somewhere within the arc of highlands running along the Taurus mountains from the south Caucasus and Armenia, possibly in the mountains around Lake Van. Their language is only imperfectly understood, but it is a non-Semitic and non-Indo-European tongue of the Asianic (possibly Caucasian) type. Its only close relative is Urartian, the language of a first millennium BCE kingdom that developed around Lake Van. Urartian and Hurrian probably descended from a common linguistic ancestor, though some would argue that Urartian was just a late form of Hurrian. The Hurrians may be the people referred to in the Bible as Horites.

As a distinct group, they are first mentioned in Akkadian sources of the latter third millennium BCE. At that time, the Hurrians were ruling some small city-states in northern and northeastern Mesopotamia. The most important of their early city-states was Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan), which Hurrian myth identified as the residence of the primordial god Kumarbi. Excavations have uncovered the palace and temple of the Akkadian Period state. Hurrian migrations southward and westward seem to have increased during the Akkadian and Ur III Periods, possibly as part of the widespread disturbances occurring from about 2200 to 2000 BCE.

By the early part of the second millennium BCE, a significant portion of the population of Syria and southeastern Anatolia was Hurrian, though they were still in the minority there and for the most part they did not hold political control. Even the Hurrian city of Urkesh was at this time controlled by the rulers of Mari. There were sizable numbers of Hurrians living at Mari, Ebla, and Alalakh, as well as at Chagar-Bazar, Carchemish, Aleppo, and Ugarit and even in Babylonia. Hurrian month names were used in seventeenth-century BCE Yamhad (Aleppo) and Alalakh, and about half the names in the texts from Alalakh Level VII were Hurrian when the city was destroyed by the Hittite king Hattusili I (c. 1650–1620 BCE).

The Hittite destruction of Yamhad and Babylon around 1600 BCE and the subsequent Hittite internal problems left a power vacuum that the Hurrians rushed to fill. They settled in large numbers at Tepe Gawra, Nuzi, and Arrapha in northern Mesopotamia and wielded enormous influence in Qatna, Tunip, Ugarit, Alalakh, and Emar in Syria and Kizzuwatna in southeastern Anatolia. At about this same time (soon after c. 1600 BCE), the various Hurrian city-states were unified into a single kingdom or confederation of kingdoms. This new kingdom, centered between the Habur and Balikh Rivers where its capital Wasshukanni (Tell el-Fekheriyeh?) was probably located, was known by several names. The Hittites called it the Land of Hurri after the main

component of its population. The Assyrians called it Hanigalbat, which originally was the name of an important area or a kingdom within the confederation. The Egyptians knew it as Naharina (“the rivers”), derived from a Semitic term for northern Mesopotamia, especially the area around the upper Euphrates, Balikh, and Habur Rivers. However, the people of this new kingdom called it Mitanni (or Maittani in its earliest form).

Little is known about the earliest stages of the kingdom, except for a few isolated names of kings, such as Parrattarna, who would have ruled around 1500 BCE. It was once commonly accepted that the rulers and aristocracy of Mitanni had Indo-Iranian (Aryan) names. For example, king Tushratta was interpreted as “owner of terrible chariots” and Biridashwa “possessing great horses.” In addition to Hurrian gods, the upper classes supposedly worshipped the Indo-Iranian or Proto-Vedic deities Mitrasil (Mithra), Indar (Indra), Arunasil (Varuna), and Nasattyana (the Nasatyas). Some personal names were also thought to contain the names of Indar/Indra (the war god) and other Indo-Iranian divine elements such as Soma (a plant whose juice gives immortality), Vaya (the wind god), the Devas (a group of deities), Svar (heaven), and Rta (the divine law). A Mittanian horse training text also contains Indo-Iranian numerals and technical words pertaining to horses and chariots. Moreover, members of the chariot-using military elite were called *maryannu*, a term which was thought to be formed from the Indo-European word *marya* (“young man” or “warrior”) with a Hurrian ending. This alleged Indo-European (or more specifically Indo-Iranian) elite was often designated “the Mitanni” (after the name of the kingdom) to distinguish them from their Hurrian subjects.

However, specialists on the Hurrians do not hold this view today. The linguistic affinity of the royal names is now regarded as uncertain, and most of the Mitannian kings had Hurrian personal names, so at best the “Indo-Iranian” names were only traditional throne names. Hurrian probably was the kingdom’s spoken language, used even by its ruling class, though Akkadian was used for most written records and correspondence. The term *maryannu* has been re-analyzed, and now it is recognized as a Hurrian word, not one of Indo-Iranian derivation. The supposed Indo-Iranian deities were only four out of more than a hundred listed at the end of a treaty, and the fact that they are listed last suggests that they were minor deities. They were not the main gods worshipped by the ruling elite. These divine names and some technical words in the horse training tablets may indicate that at some point Hurrians came into contact with groups of Indo-Iranians (probably in northwestern Iran) resulting in these “fossil” linguistic remains (Diakonov 1972; Houwink ten Cate 1995: 266–267). But it is no longer generally accepted that Indo-Iranians formed a ruling class governing a population that was largely Hurrian. Mitanni was likely a Hurrian kingdom from the peasants up to and including

the king.

By about 1500 BCE, Mitanni had expanded to become the most powerful kingdom in western Asia. It controlled virtually all of Syria, northern Mesopotamia (including Assyria), southeastern Anatolia, and the Levantine coast down to a point about midway between Qadesh and Gubal (Greek Byblos). Meanwhile, the Egyptians were extending their control over Palestine and Lebanon, leading to clashes between these two great powers (see [Chapter 8](#)). The Hittite kingdom also was threatened by the growth of Mitanni, losing territory in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia. By the late fifteenth century BCE when a new dynasty began the restoration of Hittite power, Hurrians were a significant part of the population in several former Hittite lands, and Hittite culture had come under strong Hurrian cultural influence (see [Chapter 9](#)). In the century that followed, the Mitannians, Hittites, and Egyptians formed a triangle of shifting political rivalries and alliances that shaped much of the political history of the fourteenth century BCE.

Kassite Rule in Babylonia

Following the Hittite raid in 1595 BCE a new dynasty of kings established itself on the throne of Babylon. The kings of this dynasty had foreign names and are called Kassites. The Kas-sites probably originated in the central Zagros Mountains (the area of modern Luristan), south of the homeland of the earlier Gutians and Lullubi. So far, linguists have not been able to determine a family relationship for the Kassite language, which is known only from personal names and a few Assyrian word lists. There is wide variation in the way Babylonian scribes wrote Kassite words, indicating that it must have sounded very strange to them. The Kassites called themselves *galzu*, but in Akkadian the term was usually written *kasshu*. The English term for them, Kassites, comes from this Akkadian term through the Greek form, *Kassaioi*. However, once the Kassites gained control of Babylon, they adopted Babylonian Akkadian for both speech and writing. Some scholars have suggested that an Indo-Iranian group joined the Kassites or influenced them, for the names of a few Kassite gods such as Shuriash and Maruttash may possibly be Indo-European (Surya and Marut).

As we have seen, a Kassite army entered Mesopotamia during the reign of Samsu-iluna (c. 1749–1712 BCE). However, others continued filtering in peacefully for some time after that, for documents list Kassites working as herdsmen and harvesters. By around 1700 BCE, the Kassite name of a king of Hana on the middle Euphrates indicates that Kassites probably had gained

control of that city-state. Around the same time they took Mari. Their hold on this area (through their occupation of Mari and the kingdom of Hana centered on Terqa) may have facilitated the Hittite army's movement down the Euphrates to attack Babylon in 1595 BCE. Whether by prior agreement or happenstance, after the Hittites left, the Kassites moved into Babylon and established themselves in power. The Kassite Dynasty ruled Babylonia (or Karduniash as they called it) for slightly more than four centuries, longer than any other dynasty in Mesopotamian history (1550?–1155 BCE).

Little is known about the early Kassite kings of Babylon, for no documents from this period have been published. Like earlier conquerors of Mesopotamia, the Kassites seem to have quickly adopted the local language, religion, and customs, their origins being recognizable only by their names. By the middle to late fifteenth century BCE they conquered the Sealand, giving them control over all of Babylonia. In fact, after their defeat of the Sealand, they were able to create a sense of national identity in southern Mesopotamia, unifying the land under their control more completely than ever before. As Walter Sommerfeld (1995: 918) states, "The Age of the city-states was over. From this point on, the ruler was the Babylonian king, while national unity became the new form of political organization and remained so without major changes in subsequent times." Under Kassite rule Babylonia flourished and enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity and international prestige. The Kassites rebuilt many of the old urban centers and supported the old Babylonian cults. But the Kassites abandoned hope of regaining the north and agreed to a boundary treaty with Assyria, effectively dividing Mesopotamia into two lands: Babylonia and Assyria.

Kassite Period scribes continued the Old Babylonian Period's literary activities, reworking earlier material, including preserving the Sumerian language, and creating new works that exhibit fresh themes and motifs. One of the characteristics of the literature of the period is a new emphasis on resignation, doubt, loneliness, personal sin, and the wish for stability and salvation. Personal names, as well as literature, reflect these themes by pleading to the gods: "Take My Burden From Me, O Marduk," "How Have I Sinned Against God?," "Champion the Weak, O Goddess!," or "Save (Me), O Marduk!" (Sommerfeld 1995: 928). Speculation about the unfathomable nature of the gods and the reasons for suffering and misfortune as well as the human desire for divine deliverance and salvation are exhibited in a wisdom composition from this time called *Ludlul bel nemeqi* ("Let me praise the Lord of Wisdom" [i.e., Marduk]). This poem is often called the Babylonian *Job*, because in it a well-to-do sufferer experiences great affliction and complains bitterly about his fall from grace. However, three dreams eventually bring the promise of divine pardon, salvation, and restoration, allowing the poem to end

as it began with a hymn of praise to Marduk as savior.

Some scholars place the composition of *The Creation Epic* (*Enuma Elish*) during the Kas-site Period. But even if its composition goes back to the Old Babylonian Period, *The Creation Epic* attained its classic form during this era. The Standard Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* also was the work of a Kassite poet-editor named Sin-leqe-unninni. He added a new prologue to the epic, changing its name (which in Mesopotamia consisted of the first words of a composition) from *The Greatest of All Kings* to *He Who Saw the Deep*. The name change reflects the change in emphasis. Instead of the all-conquering hero of the Old Babylonian epic (see “Old Babylonian Cultural Developments: Literature” earlier in this chapter), the Gilgamesh of the Kassite Standard Version is a much more human figure who experiences “wearying toil” and great hardships before acquiring wisdom that brings him peace. Several episodes had already been added to the Old Babylonian story before Sin-leqe-unninni’s time, particularly Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying the Bull of Heaven and Gilgamesh’s rebuff of Ishtar’s sexual advances (both of which help provide the motivation for Enkidu’s death). The Kassite poet probably added the story of the Great Flood, originally a separate story that he incorporated by having Utnapishtim relate it to Gilgamesh. Another new episode concerns the Plant of Rejuvenation added at the end of the poem. The new ending drives home the epic’s new emphasis on the lessons Gilgamesh learns from his trials. After failing the challenge to stay awake for a week and accepting the inevitability of death, Gilgamesh is given a small ray of hope by Utnapishtim. He tells Gilgamesh of a plant on the bottom of the sea that confers renewed youth and vigor (not immortality, as many interpreters claim).⁸ Gilgamesh obtains the plant, but he does not eat it immediately; presumably he was planning to take it home and share it with his people. However, humans lost even this limited blessing of remaining youthful until the moment of death, for while Gilgamesh was bathing in a pond, a snake gobbled up the plant. Gilgamesh now recognizes not only the impossibility but also the impropriety of his entire quest to escape death and old age. He returns to his city a wiser man, accepting his humanity and the role that is suitable for humans: to build, to create a civilized environment, to enjoy life while it lasts, and hopefully, to grow old before death. As the reader was told at the beginning of the poem, “From a far journey he returned, was weary but at peace” (Moran 1995: 2335; see also George 1999: 1).

Among the accomplishments of the Kassite Period, four other innovations are particularly noteworthy. The Kassite rulers abandoned the use of year names and instead counted years from the first New Year following a king’s coronation. Thus, events and documents would be dated, for example, “first year of king X” or “fifth year of king Y.” The Kassites also introduced the use of

the *kudurru*, a small decorated and inscribed stele recording an official land grant from the king or a high official. The king provided the land grants recorded on these stelae in return for loyalty and dutiful service on the part of the recipients. Most of the land distributed in this way was at a distance from the large cities, especially in the Sealand near the Persian Gulf and in the eastern Tigris region. Thus, the grants provided population for sparsely settled areas and brought more land under cultivation.

The third innovation of the Kassites was in the field of art and architecture. The Kas-sites built a new capital city in the north called Dur Kurigalzu (modern Aqar Quf) and experimented with different types of building and decoration. In addition to a classical-style ziggurat, they built a huge palace decorated with wall paintings which foreshadow the better-known Assyrian palaces of the first millennium BCE. At Uruk, a Kassite temple to Inanna shows Kassite creativity. The temple was of a new design and the façade featured a relief of gods made from molded bricks (see [Figure 6.5](#)). This type of decoration continued into Neo-Babylonian and Persian times, perhaps the best-known examples being the figures on the sixth century BCE Ishtar Gate. The most typical monument of the Kassite Period was the *kudurru* (mentioned earlier). These featured images of the protective deities represented with symbols, such as the dragon and spade for Marduk. Continuing in use for the next five hundred years, the *kudurrus* provided a new Mesopotamian visual code.



Figure 6.5 A Kassite Temple Façade

The Kassites introduced the practice of using molded bricks to create relief sculptures on building façades as seen on this late fourteenth century BCE temple at Uruk.

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Finally, the Kassites probably contributed significantly to the development and enhancement of the light war chariot. Kassite words are used for several technological improvements in both chariots and their harnesses. Babylonia also became noted for producing fine horses to pull these new instruments of war. The Kassites were among the first to systematically breed horses, keeping records of the pedigree and special characteristics of each animal. They then used this information to selectively produce horses that were best suited for chariot warfare. In a letter to the Kassite king Kadashman-Enlil II, the Hittite king Hattusili III, seeking some of these Babylonian steeds, exclaims, “In the country of my brother there are more horses even than there is straw” (Sommerfeld 1995: 925). As the light war chariot became the main weapon of war, the Kassite skills in horse breeding not only helped them defend their territory, but also provided Babylon with a major international trade item for exchange with the rulers of other great powers such as the Hittites and Egyptians.

Notes

1. Outside of Mesopotamia this era is generally known as the Middle Bronze Age.
2. Although this edition follows the Middle Chronology for all dates (see the Introduction) there is a growing consensus that the second millennium BCE dates should be lowered by about 8 years. See Sallaberger and Schrakamp (2015: 11).
3. Some scholars prefer the spelling Hammurapi (“the [Divine] Kinsman Heals”) for this king’s name. However, the spelling Hammurabi (“the [Divine] Kinsman is Great”) is not only more familiar, it is probably correct. See Sasson (1995a: Vol. 2, 902).
4. It should be noted that Jack Sasson is describing this view, not embracing it.
5. The earliest attestation of any Indo-European language is the presence of Hittite names in the texts of Kultepe Karum II, c. 1900 BCE.
6. A few scholars such as Kammenhuber (1968) and Diakonov (1972) have challenged all attempts to connect the introduction of light war-chariots with Indo-Europeans. However, their attempt to date the use of horse-drawn chariots for warfare earlier than the second millennium BCE is almost certainly incorrect as Robert Drews has shown (1988: 102–105).
7. Some scholars have doubted that Labarna ever existed, arguing that Hattusili used Labarna as a throne name, confusing later writers. However, for arguments supporting the existence of Labarna, see Bryce (2005: 65).
8. Ephraim A. Speiser pointed this out long ago (1955: 96, note 227). The plant’s name is “Man Becomes Young in Old Age” and after eating it, the snake sheds its old skin, becoming shiny and “new” again. This clearly indicates that the plant confers rejuvenation, not immortality. Snakes continue to shed their skins and remain “youthful,” but experience surely must have taught the ancient Mesopotamians that despite that fact snakes do die! See also William Moran (1995: 2335).

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The Rise and Fall of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom

Between c. 2150 and 1540 BCE Egyptian culture would be subjected to much stress and trauma as the Nile valley went through successive periods of chaos and anarchy (The First Intermediate Period), restoration of unity and royal power (The Middle Kingdom), and then renewed turmoil and division (The Second Intermediate Period culminating in Hyksos rule). These many internal problems and fluctuations were foreign to the Egyptian concept of *ma'at*. Nevertheless, during these eras Egyptian culture underwent several important modifications and changes that lasted into later times, including acceptance of the concept of a final judgment in the afterlife, development of new literary genres, and adoption of new technology and military equipment.

The First Intermediate Period: Dynasties 8–Early 11 (c. 2150–1980 BCE)

Where Is Ma'at ?

Scholars disagree about exactly when the Egyptian Old Kingdom ended and the First Intermediate Period began. It is likely that Manetho's Seventh Dynasty is totally spurious, and several Eighth Dynasty kings had very short reigns. However, the rulers of the Eighth Dynasty ruled from Memphis and claimed sovereignty over the entire country. So, some would place the end of the Old Kingdom at the end of the Eighth Dynasty (c. 2118 BCE). On the other hand, Eighth Dynasty kings do not seem to have been able to control most parts of Egypt, and the centralized administration of the state seems to have largely collapsed at the end of the Sixth Dynasty. Thus, many scholars regard the Eighth Dynasty as the initial phase of the First Intermediate Period when

division and disorder characterized Egypt. This is the view taken in this work (see [Table 7.1](#)).

About 2150 BCE, the weakness of the early Eighth Dynasty pharaohs and the strength of some noble families led to a partitioning of the state. During the latter part of the twenty-second century, the nomarchs of Herakleopolis, a city some seventy miles south of Memphis, declared themselves kings. Manetho designated these Herakleopolitan kings as Dynasties Nine and Ten. Their kingdom included the Faiyum basin, which was part of their own nome, and supposedly extended northward to the apex of the Delta, just past Memphis, and southward to around Asyut. However, as texts from Beni Hasan show, these kings had little real control over the local rulers in central Egypt. The nomarch of Thebes also declared himself king at about the same time, establishing Manetho’s Eleventh Dynasty. These two sets of kings contended for control of the central Egyptian area, fighting several battles in the area just north of Abydos.

Meanwhile, large portions of Egypt, especially the Delta and parts of central Egypt, remained outside the effective control of these dynasties and were ruled by local magnates. Some areas experienced disorder, turmoil, and strife. As mentioned in [Chapter 5](#), the level of the Nile’s floods also had been declining since the latter part of the Old Kingdom. Obviously, years of very low floods would have added to the people’s hardship. Under these unsettled conditions, tomb robbing became rampant, foreign trade decreased significantly, the Egyptians’ standard of living declined dramatically, and famine and disease occurred in some areas. An Egyptian inscription claims that during years of famine, “the entire south died of hunger, every man devouring his own children” (Gardiner 1961: 111). This text, like others describing the chaos and anarchy, clearly exaggerates for rhetorical and political effect. However, the localized political and social disorder must have compounded the effects of low Nile floods, causing food shortages and even starvation in parts of Egypt (Bell 1971; Wilkinson 2013: 107–108). At the same time, some Syro-Palestinian groups, probably driven from their own lands by drought, took advantage of Egypt’s weakness by moving in and settling in the eastern Delta.

Table 7.1 Chronology of the First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, and Hyksos Era

The First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 8–Early 11)	2150–1980
Middle Kingdom (Dynasties Late 11– Early 13)	1980–1760
Late Eleventh Dynasty (postconquest)	1980–1940
Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II	2009–1959

Sankhkare Mentuhotep III	1958–1947
Nebtowyre Mentuhotep IV	1947–1940
Twelfth Dynasty	1939–1760
Amenemhet (Ammenemes) I	1939–1910
Senwosret (Sesostris) I	1920–1875
Amenemhet (Ammenemes) II	1878–1843
Senwosret (Sesostris) II	1845–1837
Senwosret (Sesostris) III	1837–1798
Amenemhet (Ammenemes) III	1818–1773
Amenemhet (Ammenemes) IV	1772–1764
Sobekneferu	1763–1760
The Early Thirteenth Dynasty	1760–1725
The Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties Late 13–17)	1725–1539
The Late Thirteenth Dynasty	1725–1630
The Fourteenth Dynasty	1725–1630
(Miscellaneous Rulers of Parts of the Eastern Delta?)	
The Fifteenth Dynasty (The Hyksos)	1630?–1530
Sheshi (Salitis?)	1630?–
Khyan	?
Auserre Apopi (Apophis)	1575–1540
Khamudi	1540–1530
The Sixteenth Dynasty (Hyksos Vassals in Middle Egypt?)	1630?–1530
The Seventeenth Dynasty (at Thebes)	1630–1540
Sanakhtenre Tao I	7–1546
Seqenenre Tao II	1546–1542
Kamose	1542–1540

Note: All dates are BCE. These dates are probably accurate to within 16–60 years.¹ Only the Twelfth Dynasty has all its rulers listed. Since some scholars use the Greek forms of various royal names, these are given in parentheses.

The Intermediate Period's Effects

This era of discord and division shattered Egyptian confidence in the ability of pharaohs and the gods to maintain *ma‘at* in this world. How could a thinking person believe in order, stability, or the divine “rightness” of nature and the state when in almost every aspect of life there was evidence that these

qualities of *ma'at* no longer prevailed? In response, the disillusioned scribes and intellectuals produced some extraordinary literary works and new religious ideas.

Pessimism, an attitude almost completely unknown in Old Kingdom texts, pervades First Intermediate Period compositions. Several writings even question some of the cornerstones of Egyptian belief. One of these works, the *Song of the Harper from the Tomb of King Intef* (or Inyotef, an early Eleventh Dynasty ruler), describes the uncertainties surrounding death and burial. Tombs had been destroyed and looted, and the afterlife was uncertain. So, it concludes, we should enjoy this life while we have it:

Enjoy pleasant times,
And do not weary thereof.
Behold, it is not given to any man to take his belongings with him,
Behold, there is no one departed who will return again.

(Tobin 2003: 333)

Another composition from this era is known as the *Dispute of a Man with His Ba* or *A Dispute over Suicide*. It records a debate between a man and his *ba* (the spiritual and personal element of his being) over the man's desire to end his life. The depression and despair expressed in this work are foreign to the optimistic life-affirming attitude of Old Kingdom times. The protagonist of this piece argues that death will be a beneficial release from this deplorable life. In the other world, he can plead his case before the gods and he will surely be happier than he is here. However, his *ba* cautions that, even with a proper burial, a person cannot be certain his body will survive and that he will attain the afterlife. Rather than suicide, the *ba* recommends the Mesopotamian-like ideas found in the *Song of the Harper from the Tomb of King Intef*—since life after death is uncertain, pursue pleasure now. However, the man answers his soul with four poems that graphically portray the misery of living in a world without *ma'at* and restate his faith in a better afterlife (see [Document 7.1](#)). In the end, the *ba* urges the man to choose life and to accept death only when it comes naturally so that the *ba* can abide with him after death.

Document 7.1 Despair over Life in a World without *Ma'at*

This selection comes from *A Dispute of a Man with His Ba*, probably composed during the Middle Kingdom. In this work, a man and his *ba* (a spiritual element of a person that expressed his or her personality and

power) argue about whether the man should commit suicide. This text reflects the despondency caused by a world devoid of *ma'at* (justice, truth, order). It also affirms the new ideas that commoners as well as kings have *ba*-spirits and will become like gods in the afterlife. The translation is from Tobin (2003: 184–186); W. Stiebing has added the explanatory material in square brackets.

Whom can I trust today?
Hearts are greedy,
And every man steals his neighbor's goods....
Whom can I trust today?
There are no righteous men,
And the land is abandoned over to the lawless....
Whom can I trust today?
Evil runs rampant throughout the land,
Endless, endless evil.

Death is before me today
(Like) the healing of a sick man,
Like going outside after illness.

Death is before me today
Like the fragrance of myrrh,
Like sitting under the sails on a windy day....

Death is before me today
Like a man's yearning to see his home
After passing many years in exile.

But surely, he who is yonder [i.e., in the afterlife] will be a living god,
Having purged away the evil which had afflicted him.
Surely, he who is yonder will be one who stands in the sun barque [i.e., sails with Re in his solar boat],
Having made the necessary offerings to the temples.
Surely, he who is yonder will be one who knows all things,
Who will not be prevented from standing in the presence of Re when he speaks.

A novel feature in the genre of Egyptian literature known as “Instructions” also appeared during this time. These wisdom texts supposedly present the instructions a pharaoh handed down to his son and successor. They usually consist of wise sayings, proverbs, and practical advice about life and kingship. However, in the *Instruction for King Merikare*, composed during the First Intermediate Period, a king of Herakleopolis (the supposed author) expresses regrets and admits he made mistakes (translation by Tobin 2003: 163; material in square brackets added by W. Stiebing):

Behold, a dreadful incident occurred in my time:

The nome of This [the border area near Abydos] was laid desolate.
Indeed, it did not happen through anything I [directly] had done [or authorized],
And I learned of it only after it had been committed.

This open acknowledgment of the king's fallibility and humanity is something new, but it would continue to occur in similar Middle Kingdom compositions.

The *Instruction for King Merikare* emphasizes the need for everyone, king and commoner alike, to act in accordance with *ma'at*. It stresses social justice and mercy—for example, providing comfort for those who weep, compassion for widows, respect for property rights, and fairness in legal judgments. Furthermore, it declares that the character of an upright person is more acceptable to god than the religious sacrifices of the unjust. These ideas are similar to the much later Israelite prophetic teachings. However, perhaps this work's most significant new feature is that it declares that good actions are not just practical or beneficial in this world, but also in the world to come. It contains the earliest known reference to a final judgment in the afterlife:

As for the (divine) tribunal which judges sinners,
You know that they are not indulgent
On that day of judging the offender...
A man will survive after death,
His deeds will be set out beside him as (his) reward.

(Tobin 2003: 157)

While the *Dispute of a Man with His Ba* wrestles with the problem of living in a chaotic world devoid of *ma'at*, the *Instruction for King Merikare* provides an answer that some Egyptian thinker(s) had developed: evil, injustice, and social and political anarchy may flourish at times in this world, but in the afterlife, *ma'at* will prevail. The gods will judge each person's deeds, and those who have not acted in accordance with *ma'at* will not enjoy an afterlife. However, the person who passes the judgment and attains the afterlife “will exist there like a god, walking proudly like the Lords of eternity” (Tobin 2003: 158).

At this time, Re was thought to head the council that judged the dead. However, by the New Kingdom, Egyptians had come to believe that Osiris, god of the dead, would preside over the final judgment. Before Osiris, an individual's heart—the source of thought and will—was weighed against *ma'at*, often symbolized by her feather (see [Figure 7.1](#)). A crocodile-headed creature known as the “Devourer” waited anxiously to consume those who failed the test. Those who passed were described as “true of voice” (or “justified”). Thus, by linking people's everyday actions in this world with a final judgment, Egyptian religion anticipated by some 1,500 years a concept that became basic within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

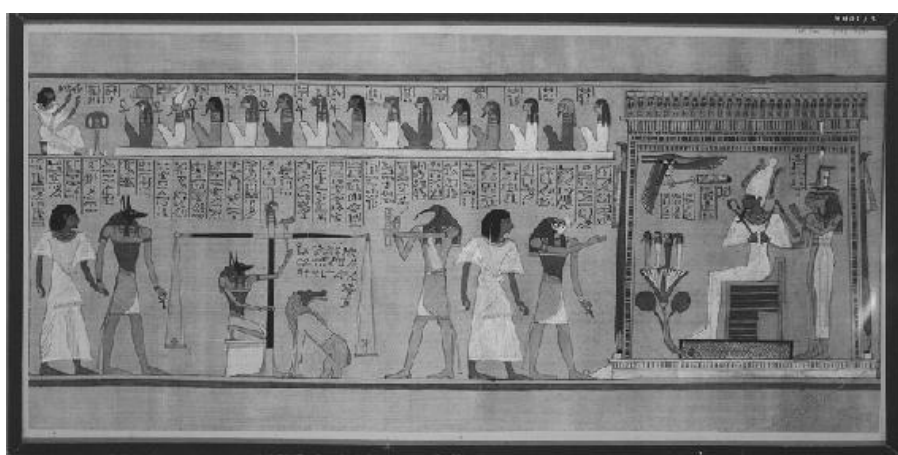


Figure 7.1 Weighing the Heart against *Ma'at*

© The Art Archive/British Museum/Jacqueline Hyde.

A final point to be noted is that in the afterlife, the righteous dead will exist *like gods*. As we have seen, during the Old Kingdom, only a king or a god had a *ba*, and the king was the only earthly creature who in the afterlife was transformed into an *akh*, a being of light, like the other gods. An ordinary person's *ka* might enjoy some kind of afterlife within its tomb, magically consuming food offerings and experiencing the everyday activities depicted on the tomb's walls, but it did not become like a god. During the era of chaos after the collapse of the Old Kingdom, it seems that members of the elite not only usurped pharaoh's power and titles, but also his unique *ba* and afterlife. They began to claim that every person had a *ba*, as the *Dispute of a Man with His Ba* shows. Furthermore, they believed that every individual could become an *akh* after death. To guarantee this result, on the interiors of their wooden coffins, wealthy individuals inscribed versions of the once-exclusive ritual Pyramid Texts designed to assure the king eternal life with the gods. Scribes also composed similar magical inscriptions to aid individuals in their transformation to eternal beings. These Middle Kingdom compositions are known as the Coffin Texts (Quirke 2015: 219–220). The descendants of all of these funerary texts, written on papyrus in New Kingdom times, have come to be known as the *Book of the Dead*.

Scholars have termed these revolutionary changes in mortuary beliefs and practices “the democratization of the afterlife.” From this time on, anyone who could afford mummification, a tomb and its furnishings, proper burial rites, and who also passed the final judgment would become like a god in the other world. Like the king, he or she would become an Osiris and would join Re and the other gods in their eternal activities (see the last section of [Document 7.1](#)).

However, lest the word “democratization” be taken too seriously, it should be noted that all these mortuary requirements were very expensive. Only a small portion of the Egyptian population had the wealth needed to guarantee itself a blissful afterlife.

An important offshoot of the “democratization” of religion, especially the idea of an individual judgment after death, was the rise of personal piety. Individuals seem to have become as concerned with their own spirituality and private worship as they were with their role in the nation’s corporate religious rites. The Coffin Texts and their descendants, *The Book of the Dead* and other New Kingdom funerary texts, focus on an ordinary individual’s salvation rather than the salvation of the pharaoh and through him the salvation of Egypt. And some surviving New Kingdom prayer texts address notions of personal sin and redemption. Most of these elements of personal piety remained an important part of Egyptian religion up to and beyond the triumph of Christianity in the Late Roman Period.

The Middle Kingdom: Dynasties Late 11–Early 13 (c. 1980–1760 BCE)

The Establishment of the Middle Kingdom

The early kings of Dynasty 11, ruling from Thebes, had fought the Herakleopolitan kings for control of the territory around Abydos. By about 2150 BCE, the Theban monarchs had managed to extend their rule almost to Asyut. Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II (c. 2009 to 1959 BCE) continued his predecessors’ drive northward, and finally, probably in the second half of his long reign, reunified Egypt (Grajetzki 2015: 307). This reestablishment of peace, unity, and centralized control around 1980 BCE constitutes the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.

Mentuhotep II changed his Horus name to “Unifier of the Two Lands” to celebrate the restoration of Egyptian unity. He also undertook campaigns to the south, regaining control of most of Lower Nubia, the area between the first and second cataracts. Once again, Nubian raw materials and trade goods began flowing into Egypt. The most important of these products was gold. The pharaohs’ demand for gold continually increased while Egypt’s own gold deposits were decreasing, so from the Middle Kingdom on, Nubia became Egypt’s primary source for this precious metal. Almost as important as Nubia’s

gold were the skilled archers the Egyptians began recruiting there. Mercenary Nubian bowmen became an important component of Middle Kingdom Egyptian armies (see [Figure 7.2](#)).



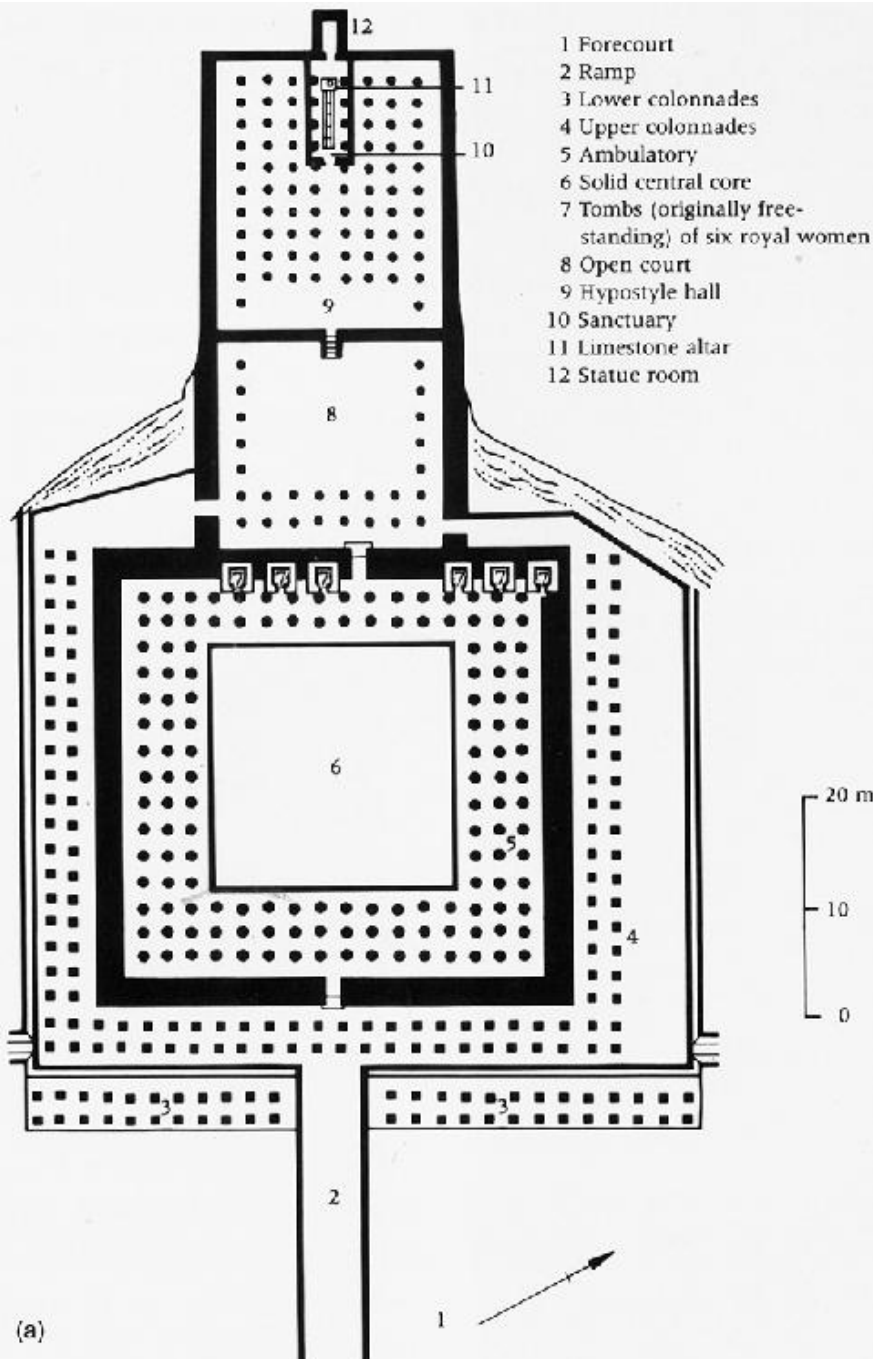
[Figure 7.2](#) Middle Kingdom Model of a Contingent of Nubian Archers

© The Art Archive/Egyptian Museum Cairo/Gianni Dagli Orti.

Chief among Mentuhotep II's many building projects is his mortuary temple and tomb on the West Bank at Thebes. The revival of the tradition of monumental tomb building is a clear indication of Mentuhotep's newly found wealth and power. He chose a location at the southern end of a semicircular bay in the cliffs almost directly across the river from the Temple of Amun at Karnak. Today this area is known as Deir el-Bahri. There, Mentuhotep II erected a series of terraces in front of a hall and shrine cut into the cliffs. The base was a large square platform with a colonnade of square pillars across its front (the first example of a hypostyle hall). Atop the platform was a second colonnade surrounding a square structure that might have been capped by a small pyramid or, more likely, a *mastaba* or "primeval mound" (see [Figure 7.3](#)). Mentuhotep II's tomb chamber was reached by a shaft that entered the cliffs from the rear of this temple complex, but there was another chamber directly beneath the platform. This cenotaph, or memorial chamber, held an empty

sarcophagus, a statue of the king in *hebsed* (Jubilee Festival) ritual garb, and other objects associated with the king's jubilee, probably celebrated in his thirtieth year of rule.

As might be expected, several of Mentuhotep II's high officials were buried in nearby tombs. However, also near Mentuhotep's temple, there was a remarkable tomb containing the



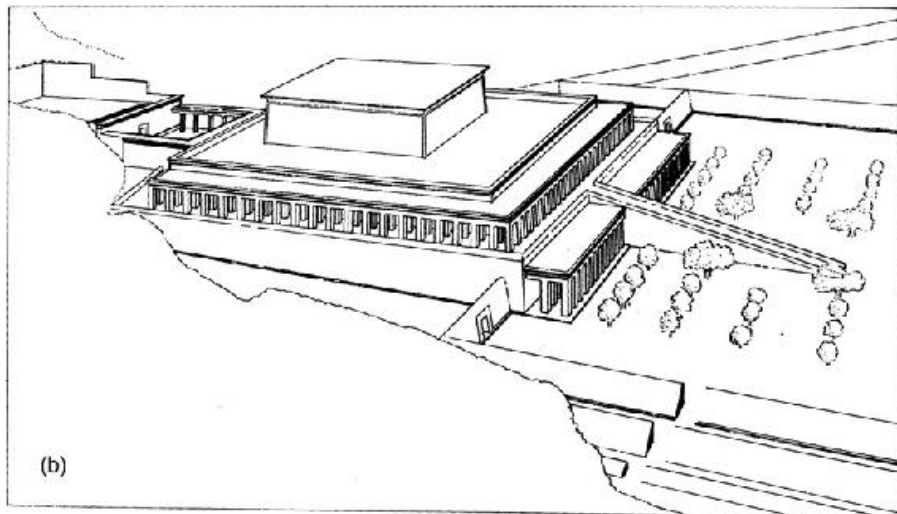


Figure 7.3a Plan and Reconstruction of Mentuhotep II's Mortuary Temple at Deir el-Bahri, Thebes

Adapted from Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (British Museum Publications, p. 93).
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

bodies of sixty of his soldiers. Their wounds show that they were killed in combat, and the condition of the bodies indicates that they were buried after being brought back from some distant battlefield. Mentuhotep II must have chosen to honor the fallen heroes of one of his major victories (either his conquest of the north or his conquest of Lower Nubia) by giving them a mass burial near his own resting place.

After the reign of Mentuhotep II's son and successor, Mentuhotep III (c. 1958–1947 BCE), internal conflict seems to have broken out again. Mentuhotep IV's relatively short reign (c. 1947–1940 BCE) was not recognized by the Turin Canon or the Abydos and Saqqara king lists. They move directly from Mentuhotep III to Amenemhet I. However, inscriptions show that Amenemhet was first the vizier and then successor of Mentuhotep IV. He may have overthrown his master and seized the throne, or Mentuhotep IV may have designated him as his heir. In any case, Amenemhet I (c. 1939–1910 BCE) was a commoner of Upper Egyptian origin who began the Twelfth Dynasty.

The Impressive Twelfth Dynasty

Perhaps some support for the theory that Amenemhet I usurped the throne may be drawn from *The Prophecy of Neferti*. This propagandistic literary

composition was probably produced during Amenemhet I's reign or soon afterward and seeks to justify his (and his successors') right to the throne. It is set in Old Kingdom times and claims to be a prophecy made to King Snefru by a priest named Neferti. This priest "predicts" a period of famine, bloodshed, and chaos (probably a reference to the First Intermediate Period). However, he claims that a king named Ameny (a shortened form of Amenemhet), a commoner from the area around the first cataract, will reunite the country, defeat its enemies and restore Egypt's peace and well-being. Thus, supposedly the gods had long ago chosen Amenemhet I to be Egypt's savior and through Neferti had foretold his rule. It is doubtful that Amenemhet would have needed such a fictitious defense if he had been the legitimate successor of Mentuhotep IV.

Clearly, though, Amenemhet I was a man of great ability. He not only restored order within Egypt, but also in Lower Nubia. Moreover, according to *The Prophecy of Neferti*, he constructed fortifications in the north (probably in the Wadi Tumilat) to stop the Asiatics' influx into Egypt. Though he came from the far southern part of Egypt, he decided to move the capital from Thebes, where his Eleventh Dynasty predecessors had ruled, to a site in the north. There, he constructed a new administrative center named Itjtawy-Amenemhet ("Amenemhet is Seizer of the Two Lands"). The site of Itjtawy, as it was usually called, has not yet been found. However, it probably was located near modern Lisht (about twenty miles south of Memphis) where the early Twelfth Dynasty kings were buried.

Amenemhet I seems to have brought almost all of the nomarchs and other strong nobles under his royal authority. However, he was unable to completely destroy their power and attain the almost unlimited dominion enjoyed by early Old Kingdom pharaohs. So, in his twentieth year of rule, Amenemhet I made his son Senwosret I (c. 1920–1875 BCE) king and co-ruler. This innovation ensured that his son would succeed him (Grajetzki 2015: 308). It also guaranteed that there would be a strong young pharaoh to keep the nomarchs under control as Amenemhet aged. Such a period of joint rule is called a **coregency**, and this one lasted for ten years. It established a precedent followed by his two successors, though their coregencies were much shorter (probably four and three years, respectively).

Despite Senwosret I's coregency with his father, a harem conspiracy seems to have been hatched when it was learned that Amenemhet was planning to yield his power totally to Senwosret. While the young king was away fighting Libyans and before the planned abdication had been publicly announced, the plotters succeeded in assassinating Amenemhet I. This event is described in *The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for His Son Senwosret I*, which claims to be the words of the dead king as revealed to his son in a dream. This document

probably was written by a court scribe during the reign of Senwosret I and likely reflects what was known about the old king's death. Amenemhet I had dozed off after supper and awoke suddenly to the sound of fighting by his guard. He is depicted as admitting his fallibility, fear, and weakness:

If I could have quickly taken weapons in my hand,
I would have made the cowards retreat in turmoil.
But no one is strong at night, and none can fight by himself;
No successful result can come about without an ally.

(Tobin 2003: 169)

Who was behind this conspiracy? The texts do not say, though Manetho claimed that the king was murdered by his eunuchs. Probably Senwosret I was also supposed to be killed and replaced by a younger prince. However, if we can trust the account in *The Story of Sinuhe*, a Middle Kingdom equivalent of a historical novel, Senwosret was secretly informed about what had happened and quickly returned to the capital, foiling the plot. After such an experience, it is likely that Senwosret I subsequently followed the advice given in *The Instruction of King Amenemhet I*:

Maintain your vigilance against those who should be subordinate to you,
But who turn out not to be so,...
Put no trust in a brother,
Acknowledge no one as friend,
Do not raise up for yourself intimate companions,
For nothing is to be gained from them.

(Tobin 2003: 168)

The rest of Senwosret I's reign and the reigns of his successors Amenemhet II (c. 1878–1843 BCE) and Senwosret II (c. 1845–1837 BCE) were largely peaceful and prosperous. These kings began a process followed by their Twelfth Dynasty successors that has been called “inner colonization” (Grajetzki 2015: 309–310). New settlements were created in parts of the country that had been only lightly populated, developed, or cultivated earlier. The Faiyum area began to be utilized more for hunting, fishing, and cultivation, so the channel from the Nile to the Faiyum's lake was enlarged. Senwosret II even had his tomb, a small mud-brick pyramid, constructed at Lahun in the Faiyum. Egypt resumed its trade with northern Lebanon and Syria and with the southern Red Sea area called Punt. Gubal (the Greek Byblos) had particularly close ties with Egypt and is sometimes characterized as an Egyptian outpost. Egypt also established contacts with the Minoan civilization on Crete. Probably also during these reigns, the Egyptians began to build fortresses at the second cataract and within Lower Nubia to regulate the movement of native Nubian groups, and

control trade, especially of gold. By the end of the Twelfth Dynasty, seven bastions standing on islands as well as at strategic points along the riverbank guarded the forty-mile stretch of the second cataract. Another six forts watched over the conquered territory between the second cataract and Elephantine. The fortress at Buhen, with its walls, moat and glacis (fortification ramp) is the best preserved of these. It functioned as a small town, housing a garrison, and was large enough for 3500 people.

Commerce also resumed between Egypt and Palestine. It is clear that by the beginning or early part of the Twelfth Dynasty, Palestine had recovered from its seminomadic interlude (the Early Bronze IV/Middle Bronze I Period) and was again becoming urbanized. Around 2000 to 1900 BCE, ideas, artifacts, and probably some population groups moved southward into Palestine from eastern Syria, initiating the true Palestinian Middle Bronze Age (MB II A). As cities and towns developed once again, so did trade with Egypt. This commerce is evidenced not only by Egyptian artifacts found at Syro-Palestinian sites and Syro-Palestinian objects found in Egypt, but by a tomb painting at Beni Hasan from the reign of Senwosret II. This painting depicts a group of Syro-Palestinians (called ‘Amu by the Egyptians) seeking permission to enter Egypt. They were delivering cosmetics, but their donkeys carry what seem to be bellows. This suggests that they were also itinerant metal smiths who sought to ply their trade in Egypt. Other groups of Syro-Palestinian merchants, artisans, and mercenaries also seem to have been allowed to live and work in Egypt during the Twelfth Dynasty. Even more “Asiatics” were brought to Egypt as slaves. A recently discovered stone from Memphis records a hitherto unknown Egyptian military expedition through Palestine and Lebanon that possibly reached as far as southeastern Turkey and Cyprus (Wilkinson 2013: 152–153). Dispatched by Amenemhet II, this expedition acquired valuable wood, aromatic oils, copper, and malachite. But most importantly, it brought back thousands of slaves to work on royal building projects.

The Middle Kingdom reached its zenith during the reigns of Senwosret III (c. 1837–1798 BCE) and Amenemhet III (c. 1818–1773 BCE). Senwosret III (see [Figure 7.4](#)) repaired and enlarged an Old Kingdom bypass channel around the rapids of the first cataract so military forces could be deployed in Nubia more quickly. He also conducted at least one military campaign in Palestine to demonstrate Egyptian power and keep the trade routes open. Because of Senwosret III’s military prowess, later New Kingdom pharaohs built temples for his worship in Nubia, and he became the model for the world-conquering Sesostris described by Herodotus and other Greek writers. Senwosret III also instituted internal administrative reforms, ending the autonomy of the nomarchs and dividing Egypt into three departments, the North (Lower Egypt), the South (Upper Egypt), and the Head of the South (Elephantine and

Lower Nubia). A senior official assisted by a council, lower ranking officials, and their staffs of scribes administered each of these departments. In addition to the three geographical departments, there were departments of agriculture, justice, labor, and the treasury. All were under the overall direction of Egypt's vizier or chief minister. Senwosret III made his son, Amenemhet III, his co-regent c. 1818 BCE, but he remained healthy and was able to share the throne with him for twenty years.



Figure 7.4 Portrait of Senwosret III

Note the tired-looking, baggy eyes and the lined, “world-weary” face.

The peaceful 25-year independent reign of Amenemhet III saw Egypt's economy reach new heights. Expeditions obtained alabaster and a hard black stone called graywacke from quarries within Egypt and diorite (a hard black and white speckled stone), amethyst, and large quantities of gold from Nubia. The turquoise mines at Serabit el-Khadim and other sites in the Sinai were also exploited as never before. Meanwhile, agricultural production in the Faiyum and foreign trade continued to increase.

In addition to military campaigns and the erection of powerful border fortresses, Middle Kingdom pharaohs tried to preserve Egypt's internal security and its control over Lower Nubia and the trade routes through the Levant by utilizing magical inscriptions called Execration Texts. Similar ritual documents had been used during the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period. However, the two most important collections of Execration Texts come from the reigns of Senwosret III and Amenemhet III. These documents consist of lists of real or potential enemies written on bowls or on clay figurines depicting bound captives that were ceremonially cursed, then broken and buried. This ritual action magically destroyed the ability of the named groups or individuals to harm Egypt or the king. Many of the names belonged to dead Egyptians whose spirits, it was feared, might still cause harm. More interesting for modern scholars, though, are the lists of Nubian peoples and the many references to various tribes, cities, and individuals in Syria and Palestine. Gubal (Byblos), Tyre, Acre, Hazor, Shechem, Jerusalem, Beth Shemesh, Ashkelon, and Aphek and are among the identifiable places mentioned in these texts.

The Twelfth Dynasty's ascendancy ended with Amenemhet III, however. Little is known about his successor, Amenemhet IV (c. 1772–1764 BCE). Soon after Amenemhet IV's death, a queen, Sobekneferu, assumed the throne (c. 1763–1760 BCE). Possibly she had been regent for a minor child who died soon after his father. In any case, like at least Nitiquet in the Old Kingdom, she seems to have ruled in her own right for a short time, using pharaonic titles. The Twelfth Dynasty ended with Sobekneferu, and though the transition to its successor seems to have been peaceful, we do not know the relationship, if any, between the founder of the Thirteenth Dynasty and his Twelfth Dynasty predecessors. The rulers later tradition grouped together as the Thirteenth Dynasty were much weaker than those of the Twelfth Dynasty. They generally had short reigns and did not all belong to the same family. Egypt quickly descended again into a period of internal division and chaos.

Cultural Developments during the Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom in Egypt is sometimes described as a “feudal” period. Scholars who use this term do not imply that it had all or even most of the characteristics of medieval, feudal Europe. Rather, this characterization reflects the fact that during much of this era, the wealthy land-owning class retained considerable power and some independence from pharaoh. However, the terminology is also due to the Middle Kingdom’s changed perception of the ruler. Instead of the all-powerful, aloof divinity of Old Kingdom times, Middle Kingdom literature and art depict the king as a lonely, conscientious protector and “good shepherd” of his people. As the examples quoted earlier in this chapter show, in the literature, kings admit to lack of knowledge, to being unprepared, and even to fear. Also, the texts stress the awesome responsibility and personal loneliness of the king who must ensure *ma‘at* for his people while being unable to trust anyone around him. This changed perception of kingship is further reflected in the world-weary, lined faces of several Middle Kingdom royal portraits (see [Figure 7.4](#)).

The Middle Kingdom was also the classical period for Egyptian secular literature. The elegant compositions of this era became literary models in the later scribal schools. They were copied over and over again, allowing many of these works to survive to the present. Continuing a trend from the First Intermediate Period, didactic moral essays, reflections on times of anarchy and distress, and pseudo-prophecies remained popular. *The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for His Son Senwosret I*, and *The Prophecy of Neferti* have already been mentioned. Other Middle Kingdom works belonging to these categories are *The Complaints of Khakheperre-sonbe*, *The Satire of the Trades*, *The Instruction of a Man for His Son*, *The Eloquent Peasant*, and possibly *The Admonitions of Ipuwer* (though it more likely belongs to the Second Intermediate Period). This era also saw the rise of romantic prose stories with historical settings such as *Tales of King Khufu and the Magicians*, *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, *The Story of King Neferkare and General Sisenet*, and the famous *Story of Sinuhe*.

Middle Kingdom burial practices also continued to evolve from those of Old Kingdom times. Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, noble burials in chambers cut directly into the cliff sides of central and southern Egyptian hills had become common (see [Figure 7.5](#)). This type of tomb remained popular during the First Intermediate Period, and a modified form of it with a larger court in front was utilized by the Eleventh Dynasty kings. However, Amenemhet I and his Twelfth Dynasty descendants tried to emulate Old Kingdom precedent by resuming the practice of building pyramids. Their structures,

erected at Lisht and later at Lahun and Dahshur, were comparable in size and construction to those of Fifth and Sixth Dynasty rulers. However, only Amenemhet I's pyramid was built entirely of stone. The other Twelfth Dynasty pyramids, like their late Old Kingdom models, had rubble or mud-brick cores with only outer casings of limestone blocks. These pyramids are poorly preserved, for their stone exteriors were robbed for reuse in later times, allowing their cores to deteriorate.

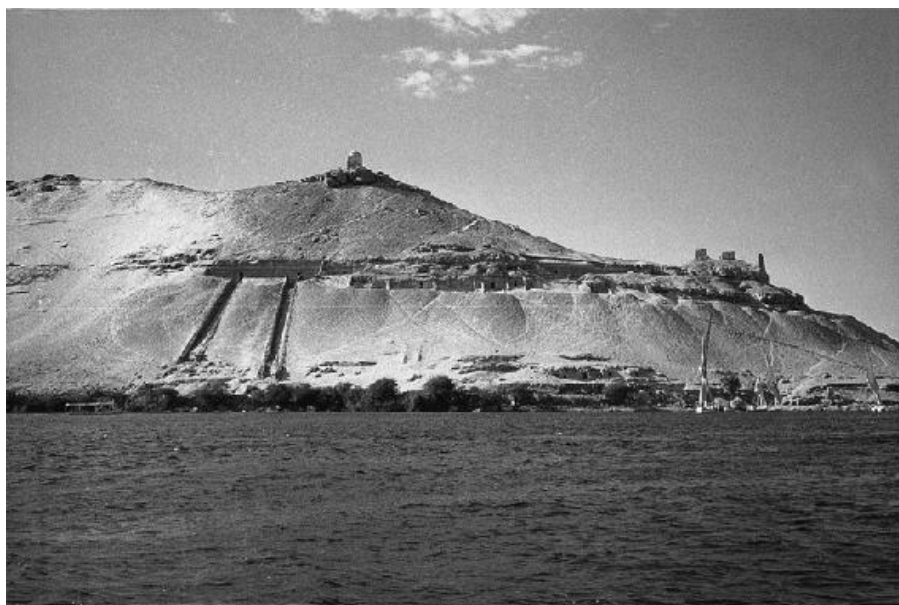


Figure 7.5 Late Old Kingdom (Dynasty 6) and Middle Kingdom Nobles' Shaft Tombs at Aswan
Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Members of the wealthy elite continued to be buried in chamber tombs cut into the stone of the hills (see [Figure 7.5](#)). It is interesting, though, that these commoners did not totally abandon their old ideas when they adopted the new belief that at death they would become like gods. They still depicted scenes of daily life in their tombs so that they could continue to experience them in the afterlife. In addition to wall paintings (and less frequently bas-relief sculptures), wooden models of everyday activities were placed in Middle Kingdom tombs (Quirke 2015: 220). As in Old Kingdom times, Egyptians believed that after death they would journey to the "Beautiful West." This land of the dead seems to have been located beneath the earth. There, they would live lives similar to those they lived in this world. Yet, at the same time, they became *akhw* ("transfigured beings") and joined the circumpolar stars in the north. They also traveled with Re in his solar boat and joined the other gods in their activities. The Egyptians never tried to reconcile these various

conceptions of the afterlife that to us seem so contradictory. They steadfastly continued to affirm all of them.



Figure 7.6 A Middle Kingdom *Shabti* Figurine

Egyptian Museum Turin. © Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

They did make a few concessions to change, however. To prevent themselves from having to actually row Re's boat or perform any other labor in the afterlife, Egyptians began placing figurines called *shabtis* or *ushabtis*

“answerers”) in the tombs (see [Figure 7.6](#)). Inscriptions on these statuettes magically empowered them to work in place of a dead person in the afterworld. If the deceased was called upon to perform any labor, the *shabti* would volunteer to do it (see [Document 7.2](#), Section A). Thus, the tomb owner would enjoy uninterrupted rest and bliss in the hereafter.

The idea of a final judgment had appealed to scribes and intellectuals as a way of preserving *ma‘at*, if not in this world, then at least in the next. However, as soon as order and stability were restored within Egypt, the elite began seeking ways to circumvent this judgment. Instead of a welcome assurance that *ma‘at* prevailed in the afterlife, the judgment became another obstacle that had to be overcome if the dead were to enjoy a blessed hereafter. To successfully pass the judgment, Egyptians began to rely more on the magical potency of spells and funerary inscriptions than upon truly moral lives and clear consciences. They created large, elaborately carved stone scarabs (images of dung beetles) with human faces in place of the beetles’ heads. Because of the inscriptions on their flat undersides, these objects are called heart scarabs. The texts on them are designed to magically prevent a person’s heart from testifying against him or her when the heart is weighed against *ma‘at* (see [Document 7.2](#), Section B). Other spells to control the heart’s testimony and attain vindication at the judgment were later incorporated into the *Book of the Dead*. They include the declaration of innocence, or “negative confession,” as it is usually known (see [Document 7.2](#), Section C), and the following:

This my heart shall not rise against me.
Obey me, my heart,
I am your owner....
Rise not as a witness,
Accuse me not before the Lord of All.

(Hornung 1990: 136)

Document 7.2 Some Magical Funerary Texts

These magical texts were placed in tombs to guarantee individuals a blessed afterlife. The inscription on a *shabti* figurine made it capable of volunteering to perform work for the deceased in the other world. The heart scarab inscription and declaration of innocence guaranteed that when the hearts of the deceased individuals were weighed against *ma‘at*, they would be judged righteous and the individuals would be admitted into the afterlife. W. Stiebing has added the explanatory material in

square brackets; the material in regular parentheses is part of the original translation.

A. Inscription on a Shabti

O figure of (name of deceased), if I am summoned, if I am registered to do any work that is wont to be done in the underworld, then the task will be transposed to you there, as a person to his duty. Apply yourself in my place at any moment to cultivate the fields, irrigate the banks, transport sand from east to west. “Here I am!” you shall say (Quirke 1992: 160).

B. Inscription on a Heart Scarab

The high steward Nebankh. He says:

Heart of my mother, heart of my mother!

Do not stand up against me, do not witness against me,

do not oppose me in the tribunal,

do not incline against me in the presence of the keeper of the scales.

You are my *ka*, the one within my body,

the Khnum [a ram-headed creator god who shaped humans’ bodies on a potter’s wheel] who makes my body whole.

You come to happiness with me.

(Forman and Quirke 1996: 104)

C. The Declaration of Innocence (Book of the Dead, Spell 125)

I have not done falsehood against men, I have not impoverished my associates, I have done no wrong in the Place of Truth.... I have done no evil, I have not daily made labour in excess of what was due to be done for me, my name has not reached the offices of those who control slaves, I have not deprived the orphan of his property, I have not done what the gods detest, I have not calumniated a servant to his master, I have not caused pain, I have not made hungry, I have not made to weep, I have not killed, I have not commanded to kill, I have not made suffering for anyone... (Faulkner 1990: 29–30).

During the Middle Kingdom, the popularity of the cult of Osiris, the god of the Underworld, grew along with the changes in burial rites and the spread of mummification to the middle classes (see [Chapter 5](#) for the mythology of Osiris). The Middle Kingdom kings paid particular attention to Osiris, setting up monuments and participating in special mysteries devoted to Osiris at Abydos. The ascent of the gods Sobek and Amun to national importance is another religious development of Middle Kingdom times. The crocodile god Sobek was a water and vegetation deity from the Faiyum. However, as one of the patrons of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Dynasty kings, his worship spread to other parts of Egypt, especially to the Delta and Ombos (near Naqada) in Upper Egypt. Amun, whose name means “the Hidden One,” was a previously obscure deity worshipped at Thebes. He had not even been the principal god of Thebes before the Middle Kingdom. That honor had gone to Montu, a hawk-headed war deity whose cult seems to have originated at nearby Hermonthis (modern Armant). Montu was the favorite deity of the Theban Mentuhoteps (“Montu is Content”) of Dynasty 11. However, Amenemhet I began to emphasize the worship of Amun. Amenemhet means “Amun is in Front” or “Amun is at the Head (of the Divine Forces).” Amenemhet I and his Twelfth Dynasty successors not only displayed their devotion to Amun in their names, but also through the monuments they erected to him at Thebes. Montu’s temple at Karnak on the northern edge of Thebes became a subsidiary of the larger temple of Amun that developed there. In addition, Amun absorbed the nature and identity of Min, a fertility god worshipped at nearby Coptos. Sobek and Amun remained prominent in later times; Amun even became the head of

the Egyptian pantheon.

The Second Intermediate Period: Dynasties Late 13–17 (c. 1725–1530 BCE)

The Onset of the Second Intermediate Period

Just as with the First Intermediate Period, it is difficult to determine exactly when the Second Intermediate Period began. Some scholars, following the example of the Abydos King List, end the Middle Kingdom at the end of Dynasty 12. Others argue that the early rulers of the Thirteenth Dynasty maintained their sovereignty over all of Egypt. Only after c. 1725 BCE does centralized control seem to have broken down, signaling the start of another intermediate period (Grajetzki 2015: 310).

Whether or not one places the first part of the Thirteenth Dynasty in the Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period, it is clear that during that era large numbers of Canaanite immigrants had filtered into the eastern Delta, settling at Tell ed-Dab'a (Avaris), Tell el-Maskhuta (probably biblical Pithom), and other sites. At Tell ed-Dab'a, house types, pottery, and burials (within the homes and sometimes with donkeys) all point to foreigners from the north (Palestine or Syria). These Semitic newcomers quickly began to adopt aspects of Egyptian culture and blend them with their own. For example, they identified several of their deities with Egyptian gods. The Canaanite storm god Ba'al became identified with the Egyptian god Seth, and the fertility goddess Qudshu or Qadesh ("the Holy One," probably an epithet of Asherah) was often linked with Hathor. Even the Egyptians eventually came to worship some of the Asiatic deities. In New Kingdom times, for example, there was a popular cult at Deir el-Medina, Memphis, and other sites in Egypt dedicated to Qudshu as part of a triad including the West Semitic plague and war deity Resheph and the Egyptian fertility god Min. Ba'al, Anat, and Astarte were also worshipped in parts of Egypt.

When royal authority over the Delta and central Egypt deteriorated around 1725 BCE, several local leaders were able to establish their hegemony over their own areas. Manetho seems to have grouped these largely contemporaneous rulers into his Fourteenth Dynasty. Some of these local rulers from the Delta area probably constitute the non-Fifteenth Dynasty Hyksos kings whose scarabs have been found at Palestinian and Syrian sites (O'Connor 1997: 48–

52). Meanwhile, the last members of the Thirteenth Dynasty continued ruling at Thebes. However, the area they controlled was very limited—their monuments and inscriptions have been found only from Abydos southward.

The chaos and confusion that followed the collapse of the Middle Kingdom lasted almost a century and seems to have been as bad as that of the First Intermediate Period, if not worse. A text that probably belongs to the end of this era, the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*,² describes conditions in Egypt during the late eighteenth and early seventeenth centuries BCE (Lichtheim 1975: 150–151, 156; W. Stiebing added the material in square brackets):

Foreigners have become people [i.e., Egyptians] everywhere....
Lo, poor men have become men of wealth,
He who could not afford sandals owns riches....
What the pyramid hid [i.e., the king's sarcophagus] is empty.
See now, the land is deprived of kingship
By a few men who ignore custom.

The Kingdom of Kush (Upper Nubia)

During the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, the flow of trade northward along the Nile from the far south to Egypt brought prosperity to those in the Nile valley south of the second cataract. In this area, a powerful Upper Nubian state developed with its center at Kerma, just south of the third cataract. From the beginning of the Twelfth Dynasty onward, the Egyptians called this kingdom “Kush.” The many Twelfth Dynasty fortresses constructed in Lower Nubia and especially along the second cataract (the least treacherous of the Nile’s rapids) were largely a reaction to the growth of this state.

During the early Thirteenth Dynasty, the Egyptians stopped rotating the garrisons of the Lower Nubian fortresses, and they became permanent settled communities. When the Middle Kingdom collapsed around 1725 BCE, what little support these communities had gotten from the central government ceased. The Egyptian and Egyptianized Nubian settlers of Lower Nubia had to fend for themselves. So, during the early part of the Second Intermediate Period, the fortress communities of Lower Nubia became independent entities. Furthermore, like their counterparts elsewhere in Egypt, some of Lower Nubia’s local rulers claimed pharaonic status. Without hope of help from Egypt, however, these “kings” realized that they would not be able to hold out for long against the military might of Kush. Thus, by c. 1630 BCE

the people of Lower Nubia seem to have peacefully accepted an Upper Nubian takeover of the fortresses and thus became part of the Kingdom of

Kush (O'Connor 1997: 63).

The kings of Kush recognized that their best interests lay in keeping the native Egyptian dynasty at Thebes weak. So, they formed an alliance with the Hyksos rulers in the north (see the following section). This alliance allowed Kush continued access not only to Egyptian objects, but also to trade goods from other parts of the eastern Mediterranean world. As we shall see, there is evidence of contact between the Hyksos and Crete. Thus, it was undoubtedly through Lower Egypt by way of the trade routes connecting the oases west of the Nile (see [Map 7.1](#)) that a few Minoan objects reached Kush (like a Middle Minoan bowl with incised decoration found at Kerma).

The rulers of Kush were buried at Kerma on beds placed in open pits covered by large earthen mounds. Animal and human sacrifice accompanied the burial rites. Like other aspects of Kushite culture, these burials were typically Nubian and derived from earlier practices in the area. However, after gaining control of Lower Nubia and the Egyptians living there, the Kushites began merging Egyptian technology and artistic elements into their culture. Egyptian artifacts became increasingly common in Kerma and elsewhere in Kush. Some of these objects were imports or booty from raids into southern Egypt, but others were the products of Egyptians living within Kush. These Egyptian artisans included not only individuals from Lower Nubia, but also immigrants from Egypt who moved southward to work for the Kushite rulers. Thus, new types of buildings, paintings, and other artifacts developed—Kushite at heart, but utilizing Egyptian styles and techniques.

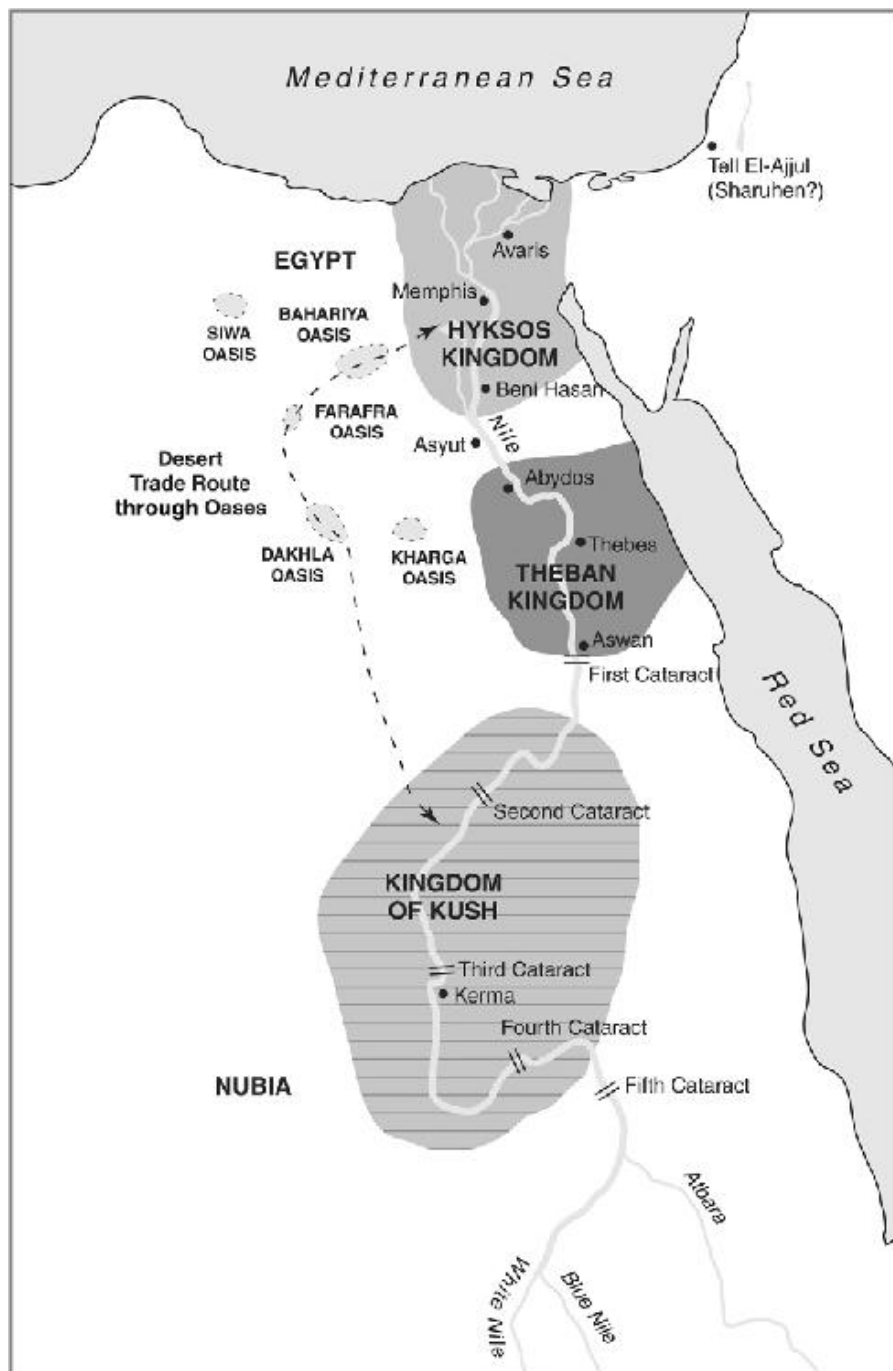
Hyksos Rule and the Dynasty at Thebes: Dynasties 15 and 17 (c. 1630–1530 BCE)

Around 1630 BCE, the Fifteenth Dynasty, a dynasty of foreigners, arose in the eastern Delta and gained control of Lower Egypt. The Egyptians called these rulers *heqau khasut* (“chieftains of foreign lands”), a designation previously used for rulers of seminomadic groups and city-states in Syria and Palestine. This appellation was later corrupted into the Greek term Hyksos and applied to the entire people, rather than just the kings. Manetho (as quoted by Josephus) preserved New Kingdom and later Egyptian traditions about the ruthless Hyksos, claiming that:

Incredibly out of the parts of the east men of despicable ethnicity marched boldly against the land, and seized it easily by overwhelming force without fighting a battle. And having taken prisoner those who were the leaders here, they thereafter savagely burned the cities and demolished the gods’ shrines. They treated all the inhabitants most hatefully,

slaughtering some, and leading into slavery the children and wives of others.

(Redford 1997: 19)



Map 7.1 Egypt during the Latter Part of the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1600 BCE)

Josephus's quote from Manetho goes on to say that the first Hyksos king was named Salitis, that he ruled from Memphis, but that his fortified stronghold was located at Avaris (Huwaret in Egyptian), a city in the eastern Delta.

Over the past fifty years, intensive textual research and archaeological finds (especially those from Tell ed-Dab'a, the site of ancient Avaris) have shown that the rise of the Hyksos was a far more complex event than one might suspect from Manetho's account. As we have seen, large numbers of Semitic-speaking Canaanite immigrants settled in the eastern Egyptian Delta during the early part of the Thirteenth Dynasty, and some of their chieftains gained control over their local areas after c. 1725 BCE. The complete collapse of the Egyptian central government led to an even larger influx of immigrants from Canaan after that date. Then, c. 1630 BCE, one group of these newcomers took control of the entire Delta and by about 1600 BCE had extended their power over parts of Middle Egypt as well (see [Map 7.1](#)). They made Avaris into one of the largest royal cities in the Near East, fortifying it with walls twenty-five feet thick and providing it with palaces, gardens, vineyards, and a stone-lined canal to bring Nile water into the city (Wilkinson 2013: 171). They even seem to have forced the native rulers at Thebes to pay tribute to them for a time, though the distance between Thebes and the Delta allowed the southerners to maintain a fair amount of freedom and local sovereignty. Though some of the earlier Canaanite rulers of small areas of the eastern Delta had accepted the Egyptian term *heqau khasut* (Hyksos) for themselves, it is the line of six powerful kings who controlled much of Egypt from c. 1630 to 1530 that constitutes Manetho's Hyksos dynasty (Dynasty 15).

When they first settled in the Delta, the Hyksos maintained their own identity and traded more with Palestine and Cyprus than with Middle and Upper Egypt. However, like other Canaanite immigrants who had preceded them, the Hyksos soon embraced Egyptian culture. They utilized the titles and symbols of Egyptian kingship, adopted Egyptian names, and used hieroglyphs to write inscriptions in the Egyptian language. They worshipped and built temples to Egyptian gods, especially Seth, who was considered the Egyptian form of their storm god, Ba'al. They also supported the traditional Egyptian arts and sciences and employed native Egyptians in their bureaucracy and as vassal rulers of some parts of Egypt. Therefore, Manetho's claim that the Hyksos destroyed Egyptian cities and temples and treated the population cruelly seems to have little or no basis in fact. That tradition almost certainly derives from later nationalistic New Kingdom propaganda.

Actually, Egypt clearly benefited from the innovations in technology and warfare introduced during the Second Intermediate Period. Palestinian

immigrants brought with them the technique for blending copper and tin to produce bronze. Bronze tools and weapons were much harder and more durable than the copper ones Egyptians had used previously. In addition, during this era, the Egyptians probably learned to use horse-drawn war chariots with spoked wheels, composite bows, bronze helmets, and protective armor made of bronze scales attached to leather shirts.

The most significant of these new military items was the horse-drawn light chariot. Horses were known in Egypt during the early part of the Second Intermediate Period, c. 1700 to 1650 BCE. Archaeologists have uncovered horse remains from that time at Buhen in Nubia and Tell ed-Dab'a and Tell el-Maskhuta in the eastern Delta. Whether or not Asiatics first brought horses into the country is still undetermined. It is likely, though, that Canaanite immigrants introduced the chariot into Egypt some time during the Hyksos Period. There are no Egyptian references to or illustrations of horses or chariots before Kamose's war against the Hyksos, c. 1542 to 1540 BCE. Nevertheless, contrary to the earlier popular view, chariots seem to have played little, if any, role in the Hyksos' rise to power or in their expulsion (Schulman 1980). However, afterward, chariots became a major component of Egypt's New Kingdom armies.

Complementing the introduction of chariots was the composite bow. Like the chariot, the composite bow had been used in other parts of the Near East long before its introduction into Egypt. A composite bow was made of fine wood strengthened by bands of sinew and horn. Thus, it was far more powerful and accurate than the simple bow. Infantry forces or defenders of fortified cities could use this bow, but it was most effective in the hands of chariot warriors. After c. 1540 BCE, the chariot warriors of all the great powers, including Egypt, generally were armed with composite bows.

About the time that the Hyksos took control of Lower Egypt, the Thirteenth Dynasty seems to have died out at Thebes. Two new families of rulers replaced it. One (omitted from later king lists and only recently discovered) ruled parts of central Egypt from Abydos (Griggs 2014), while the other, a dynasty of Theban origin (later designated the Seventeenth Dynasty), controlled the territory from just north of Thebes to Elephantine. The hitherto unknown dynasty at Abydos seems to have lasted for only about fifty years (c. 1650–1600 BCE).

As the strength of the Hyksos kings and of the rulers at Thebes increased, they seem to have gradually reduced the territory of the central kingdom by attacks from both the north and the south. This forgotten dynasty came to an end around 1600 BCE when a Theban ruler seems to have gained control of Abydos.

As has been mentioned, for a time after the end of the Abydos dynasty, the

Theban kings seem to have paid tribute to the Hyksos in order to avoid a direct confrontation. There may even have been some marriage ties between the two royal families. However, Hyksos control of Lower Egypt cut off Theban access to the Levant and the rest of the Near East. Moreover, the Hyksos alliance with Nubia threatened to strangle and destroy the native dynasty at Thebes. So, after slowly building up their military forces, the Theban rulers decided to strike first. A later popular story, *The Quarrel of Apopi and Seqenenre*, claims that the Hyksos king Auserre Apopi taunted the Theban king, goading him into attacking. Whatever the reason for the war, Seqenenre Tao II (c. 1546–1542 BCE) began the attempt to expel the Hyksos by invading Middle Egypt. However, the Egyptian vassals of the Hyksos remained loyal to their overlords and resisted the advance of the Theban forces. Though Seqenenre Tao II conquered all of the territory northward to Cusae (just south of Hermopolis in central Egypt), he did not succeed in destroying the Hyksos. His mummy was found in 1881 CE, and the terrible wounds to its head show that the king died in battle.

His son Kamose then became king c. 1542 BCE. After some preliminary attacks on Lower Nubia to secure his southern frontier, Kamose invaded Hyksos territory (see [Document 7.3](#)). He gained control of Middle Egypt and ravaged the countryside around Avaris. However, as he was preparing an assault on Avaris itself, his forces captured a Hyksos courier carrying a message urging the Nubian King of Kush to attack the Egyptians from the south. This captured letter is our main evidence that there was an alliance between the Hyksos and Kush. So Kamose had to break off his northern campaign, return home, and shore up his southern defenses. He was given an enthusiastic welcome by the Theban people, and erected two stelae commemorating his victories. Unfortunately for the Upper Egyptians, he died soon afterward (c. 1540 BCE). He had seriously reduced the size of the Hyksos realm, but he had been unable to dislodge the Hyksos from Avaris. That feat was left for his successor, his younger brother, Ahmose.

Document 7.3 The War between Kamose and the Hyksos

Kamose erected two stelae in Thebes celebrating his victories over the Hyksos. They are unique in that the second inscription seems to take up the story where the first ended (unfortunately, the end of the first stele is missing). This account of the campaign seems to be historically reliable and based on historical sources, probably including the actual captured letter “quoted” on Stele 2. The following translation by Donald Redford

(1997: 13–15) contains only portions of these two important texts. The translator added the material in parentheses, but W. Stiebing has added the explanatory material in square brackets to the translation.

His majesty [Kamose] spoke in his palace to his council of magistrates who were in his train: “To what end do I know my (own) strength? One chief is in Avaris, another in Kush, and I sit (here) associated with an Asiatic and a Nubian! Each man has his slice in this Egypt and so the land is partitioned with me! None can pass through it as far as Memphis (although it is) Egyptian water! See he [the Hyksos king] (even) has Hermopolis! No one can be at ease when they are milked by the taxes of the Asiatics (*Sttyw*). I shall grapple with him that I might crush his belly, (for) my desire is to rescue Egypt which the Asiatics (*‘3 mw*) have destroyed.”

The king’s counselors advise against war, but Kamose rejects their advice. The rest of the surviving portion of the stele records the king’s victories in Middle Egypt. The lost portion of the text presumably described the Egyptian advance toward Avaris. The second stele opens with Kamose taunting the Hyksos king in Avaris, telling him of the destruction he has wrought within the Hyksos territory. Then follows this narrative:

“I captured his messenger in the oasis upland, as he was going south to Kush with a written dispatch, and I found on it the following in writing by the hand of the Ruler of Avaris:

“*3wsr-r*’ [Auserre], son of Re, Apophis greets my son the ruler of Kush. Why have you arisen as ruler without letting me know? Do you see what Egypt has done to me? The Ruler which is in her midst—Kamose-the-Mighty, given life!—is pushing me off my (own) land! I have not attacked him in any way comparable to all that he has done to you; he has chopped up the Two Lands to their grief, my land and yours, and he has hacked them up. Come north! Do not hold back! See, he is here with me: There is none who will stand up to you in Egypt. See, I will not give him a way out until you arrive! Then we shall divide the towns of Egypt....

He [the Hyksos king] feared me [Kamose] even when I was sailing north, before we had fought, before I reached him! When he saw my flame he beat a path as far as Kush to seek his deliverer. (But) I seized it [the Hyksos letter] en route and did not let it arrive.... So I fared south confident and happy, destroying all the enemy who were in my way!”

Debating the Evidence: The Nature of Hyksos Relations with the Levant

As one might suspect, relations between the Semitic Hyksos rulers of Lower

Egypt and the peoples of Palestine and western Syria were especially close. Kamose's inscription states that hundreds of ships filled with products from the Levant were moored at Avaris. And archaeo-logical excavations there have uncovered thousands of storage jars and other vessels that came from Syria and Palestine, the vast majority deriving from southern Palestine. This fact has been demonstrated by scientific analysis of their clays (McGovern and Harbottle 1997). However, scholars disagree about the nature of the relationship between the two peoples.

The once-popular idea of a Hyksos Empire stretching over all of Palestine and Syria (and according to a few scholars, even including Crete) has now been almost universally abandoned. The main evidence thought to support this hypothesis (other than Manetho's account of an invasion from the Northeast) was the appearance of new defense systems at Palestinian and Syrian Middle Bronze Age cities. Scholars also noted that a few objects inscribed with Hyksos names had been found in Syria and Crete. The new fortifications involved surrounding cities with high steeply sloping beaten-earth or plaster-faced ramparts (*glacis*). The cities' inhabitants then usually built their defensive walls atop these ramparts. They also commonly made it even more difficult for attackers by digging deep ditches in front of the ramparts. However, it is now clear that this type of fortification developed within the Near East from earlier traditions, probably to protect city walls from assault by battering rams, ladders, and tunneling (Van Seters 1966: 27–37; Parr 1968; Mazar 1990: 180–181, 198–208). It was not introduced from the outside by an invading horde of newcomers. Also, the Hyksos objects found as far away as Crete do not prove Hyksos rule over the areas involved. Since archaeologists have found no Hyksos monuments within the presumed “Empire” or textual references to Hyksos control of areas outside of Egypt, almost all Near Eastern specialists now credit the spread of Hyksos artifacts to trade.

Some scholars think it likely, however, that the Hyksos rulers controlled at least the city-states of southern coastal Palestine and maybe also coastal Lebanon (e.g., Wilkinson 2013: 168). There were demonstrably close connections between those cities and the Hyksos Fifteenth Dynasty. Also, immediately after destroying Avaris, the Hyksos capital, the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh Ahmose attacked Sharuhēn, a fortified city in southern Palestine.³ This fact suggests to some scholars such as Toby Wilkinson that the Hyksos controlled Sharuhēn (2013: 191). Others argue that the fortified cities of southern Palestine were part of a “kingdom of Sharuhēn” (Oren 1997b). In fact, Manfred Bietak, excavator of Tell ed-Dab'a (Avaris), has suggested that the Sixteenth Dynasty, a sub-dynasty of the Hyksos, ruled from Sharuhēn rather than in Egypt (1997: 113). Thus, in this view, the “kingdom of Sharuhēn” would have been a truly unified kingdom controlling southern Canaan and an ally of

the Egyptian Hyksos. However, it is more likely that if a “kingdom of Sharuhén” (other than the single city of that name) really existed, it was only “a loose confederation of city-states under the hegemony of Sharuhén” (Oren 1997b: 256).

In fact, all these speculations go beyond the actual evidence. All that can be said with certainty is that many Palestinian products, mostly from far southern Palestine, have been found in Egyptian Delta cities, especially Avaris. Possibly these objects were sent as tribute. Possibly there was Hyksos control over southern Palestine, or possibly the Hyksos were allied with a coalition of southern Palestinian cities. However, it is also possible that the southern Palestinian objects in Egypt resulted from trade between the Hyksos Delta kingdom and individual Palestinian city-states that were independent and self-governing. In the absence of written evidence to the contrary, that last possibility seems the most likely to be correct.

Egyptian and Levantine Contacts with the Minoan Culture of Crete

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), like much of the Near East, Greece experienced some disruptions at the end of the Early Bronze Age (c. 2300–2200 BCE). Crete, however, does not seem to have been affected during this time. The Minoan culture there continued to develop without interruption, and based on later written material, the people of Crete continued to speak a non-Greek (and probably even non-Indo-European) tongue. Around 2000 BCE major palace complexes arose in five areas of Crete. The largest palace was at Knossos, near Crete’s north-central coast. However, similar structures appeared at Phaistos (near the south-central coast), Mallia (on the north coast, east of Knossos), and Petras (east Crete) and probably at three other southern sites (Monastiraki, Kommos and Archanes). These palaces served as the residences of a political or religious authority and must have played an important role in luxury craft production and the redistribution of agricultural goods. It has often been noted that in contrast to the palaces and cities of the Near East, defensive walls did not surround the Minoan palaces. This fact had led some scholars to surmise that one ruler controlled the entire island. However, recent excavations have revealed cyclopean walls at some sites, such as Petras, and systems of guard towers and forts at others. We still cannot say what the political organization of Crete was at this time, but it is likely that each center had its own ruler.

Prior to the beginning of the Middle Minoan Period (see [Table 7.2](#)) there seems to have been little or no Minoan trade with the Near East, other than

with the western coast of Asia Minor. Only a few Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and other Near Eastern objects had made their way to Crete before that time, probably through intermediaries in Asia Minor. However, with the rise of the Minoan palaces, Cretan ships began sailing further afield, at least to Cyprus and Syria and probably occasionally to Egypt as well.

Table 7.2 Chronologies of the Middle Mmoan and Late Mmoan I Periods in Crete

<i>The Archaeological “Low Chronology”⁴</i>		<i>The Scientific “High Chronology”⁵</i>		
MM I A	2200–2000	Palaces arise on Crete	MM I A	2200–2000
MM IB	2000–1900		MM I B	2000–1900
MM II A	1900–1800	Palaces destroyed (by earthquake?) at the end of MM II B, but rebuilt	MM II A	1900–1850
MM IIB	1800–1700		MM II B	1850–1800
MM III A	1700–1640	Thera explodes near the end of LM IA; palaces damaged but repaired	MM III A	1800–1750
MM III B	1640–1580		MM III B	1750–1700
LM I A	1580–1480		LM I A	1700–1620
LM I B	1480–1425	Minoan palaces destroyed at the end of LM I B; only Knossos was rebuilt	LM I B	1620–1470

Note: All dates areBCE. MM = Middle Minoan and LM = Late Minoan.

By the Late Minoan I A Period (see [Table 7.2](#)), Minoan civilization was reaching its zenith. Crete dominated the Aegean, bringing the Greek mainland under strong Minoan cultural influence. In addition, Minoan settlements were established on Thera (Santorini), Rhodes, and other Aegean islands, and the Anatolian coast (e.g. Miletus). However, during this era, there is little evidence

of extensive Minoan trade with Egypt and the Levant. Archaeologists have found only a few Late Minoan I objects in the Near East and have uncovered very few Near Eastern (mostly Egyptian) artifacts at Aegean sites. Nevertheless, there was at least some commerce between the two areas, probably mainly in raw materials. Most of the gold, copper, silver, ivory, and ostrich eggs found in Crete probably came from the Near East. In exchange, the Minoans might have traded cloth, spices, agricultural products, or other items that would not have been preserved in the archaeological record (Podany 2010: 110).

In recent years, though, archaeologists have uncovered a different kind of evidence for Minoan contacts with Egypt and the Levant during the Late Minoan I Period. Instead of pottery and other trade goods, they have found Late Minoan I A style paintings at various Near Eastern sites. The finds at Tell Kabri in northern Palestine included a painted stucco floor and bits of a fresco depicting rocks, a river, buildings, and other motifs reflecting Aegean themes and style (Niemeier and Niemeier 1992; 2002; Cline et al. 2011; Cline and Yasur-Landau 2013). Also, an addition to the palace at Kabri was lined with orthostat blocks similar to those found in palaces on Crete (Yasur-Landau et al. 2012). At Avaris (Tell ed-Dab'a) in the Egyptian Delta, archaeologists excavated fragmentary paintings of griffins, bulls, bull leapers, and other clearly Minoan designs (Bietak 1997: 117–124; Bietak et al. (eds.) 2007). Between 2000 and 2004 CE excavators also uncovered fragments of Aegean-style depictions of flora, dolphins, and turtles at Qatna in Syria (Pfälzner 2008). These recent finds complement the earlier discovery of similar Aegean-style paintings at Alalakh in Syria (Woolley 1955: 128–129, 233–234). These paintings seem to have been executed by Minoan artists. They may indicate the presence of Minoan merchants, ambassadors, or even royal brides in Egypt and some Levantine cities. However, except at Avaris, little or no Minoan pottery or other artifacts were found in the buildings containing the paintings. So, it is unlikely that Minoans occupied these structures for any length of time. The paintings could have been made by Minoan artists that Aegean rulers loaned to Near Eastern kings as a courtesy. Or, perhaps the painters were itinerant artists traveling around the eastern Mediterranean seeking commissions on their own (Podany 2010: 108–109; Cline and Yasur-Landau 2013: 38).

The Aegean frescoes at Tell Kabri and Alalakh were roughly contemporaneous with the early part of the Hyksos era in Egypt (c. 1630–1600) or possibly even earlier. The paintings from Avaris at first also were dated to the Hyksos era. However, now their excavator argues that they belong to a structure built during Hatshepsut or Thutmose III's reign (Bietak 1997: 117). The Qatna frescoes remained on the walls until the palace they decorated was destroyed in the fourteenth century BCE. However, they could have been

painted as early as the sixteenth or fifteenth centuries BCE (Cline and Yasur-Landau 2013: 42). As a result, these Aegean-style art works have become points of contention in ongoing arguments about the chronology of the Late Minoan (LM) I A Period.

Debating the Evidence: Dating the Eruption of Thera and the End of LM I A

The LM I A Period in Crete was brought to an end by a great volcanic explosion on the Cycladic island of Thera, also called Santorini. That explosion destroyed much of the island and buried Akrotiri, the site of the Minoan LM I A settlement on Thera (Friedrich 2000: 97–160; McCoy 2009; Friedrich and Sigalas 2009). It was once thought that it also had devastating effects on Crete and eventually brought the Minoan culture to an end (e.g., Driessen and MacDonald 1997). However, that view has been contested. The eruption damaged some of the palaces in Crete, but many were quickly repaired and continued to flourish in the following LM I B Period (Rehak and Younger 2001). The reason for the widespread destructions on Crete at the end of the LM I B Period is still disputed (Driessen 2013: 12–13).

The archaeological chronology for Crete dates the eruption between about 1525 and 1490 BCE and the end of LM I A at about 1480 BCE (based on pottery chronologies tied to Egyptian historical dates) (see [Table 7.2](#)). However, various scientific dating methods placed the eruption more than a century earlier, between 1645 and 1613 BCE. The scientific methods for dating the eruption included study of frost damage to tree rings caused by volcanic ash in the atmosphere, discovery of high acid levels (due to major volcanic eruptions) in Greenland ice cores, and radiocarbon dating of grain from the Minoan settlement on Thera and of the outer rings of two Theran olive trees killed by the eruption (Hammer et al. 1987; Bailie and Munro 1988; Manning 1990; Friedrich 2000: 93–95; Friedrich and Heinemeier 2009). Many scholars now view the Theran olive tree date (c. 1613 $\pm$ 13 BCE) as the one most likely to be correct. However, that date is about the time most Aegean archaeologists place the *beginning* of LM I A (c. 1600–1580 BCE). If the scientific dates are correct, LM I A must have begun and ended much earlier than previously thought. The finds at Tell Kabri and Alalakh can be fit into this higher chronology. They suggest that the LM I A Period was largely contemporaneous with the Egyptian Second Intermediate Period and the Syro-Palestinian Middle Bronze II B era (Michael and Betancourt 1988; Kuniholm et al. 1996; Betancourt 1997; Manning 1999). On the other hand, the LM I A style frescoes in a sixteenth- to

fourteenth-century palace at Qatna and in an early New Kingdom building at Avaris can be used to support the traditional Minoan chronology (Warren 1987, 1990–1991, 1999; Bietak 1997). Numerous pieces of water-borne volcanic pumice from Thera found in Egyptian layers dating to the reign of Thutmose I also indicate a date of c. 1490 BCE for the eruption (Driessen and MacDonald 1997: 22–23; Foster et al. 2009).

At present, no consensus has been reached on this issue. The evidence seems to be contradictory. Those favoring the scientific dates claim that the eastern Mediterranean chronology for the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries BCE (based on that of Egypt) needs to be revised. On the other hand, most archaeologists and historians argue that the Egyptian chronology is accurate to within about twenty years and that it is the scientific dating of Thera's eruption that is inaccurate. Ice cores produce evidence of volcanic eruptions, but there is no guarantee that the eruption of c. 1640 BCE noted in Greenland ice cores was that of Thera. There are also indications of *sixteenth* century BCE volcanic eruptions in the ice cores. The same is true of the dates derived from frost damage to tree rings located far from the Aegean. The radiocarbon date of the outer rings of olive trees growing at the time of the eruption is the strongest evidence for an early date, but perhaps the radiocarbon calibration curve for the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries BCE needs to be refined and revised. Radiocarbon dates for objects from the Egyptian New Kingdom generally agree quite well with Egyptian chronology.⁶ Why is there such a discrepancy in this one instance? There must be some underlying problem in methodology preventing an agreement on the date of the Thera eruption (Warburton 2009b; Manning and Kromer 2012; Wiener 2012; Höflmayer 2012). Whatever the final decision about Aegean chronology and the date of the Thera eruption, it is clear that Minoan Crete and Egypt were already in contact with one another during the Second Intermediate Period. This period laid the groundwork for more prevalent commercial relationships in the New Kingdom.

Notes

1. The chronology used here for the Middle Kingdom is about 40–60 years lower than the one used in the second edition of this book. For example, here Mentuhotep II is dated c. 2009–1959 BCE, whereas in the second edition he was dated c. 2060–2010 BCE. The lower chronology is the one now favored by most Egyptologists. However, studies using radiocarbon dates of short lived samples combined with Bayesian modeling suggest that the higher chronology for the Middle Kingdom may be correct (Shortland and Bronk Ramsey (eds.) 2013; Höflmayer 2016). So far, radiocarbon specialists have not been able to

- convince most Egyptologists to return to the higher chronology.
2. It was once generally accepted that the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* belonged to the First Intermediate Period. However, many Egyptologists now agree with John Van Seters (1966: 103–120) that it dates to the Second Intermediate Period or the beginning of the New Kingdom. Some, though, still prefer the earlier date. Its claims about the chaos of the Intermediate Period are somewhat exaggerated in order to contrast them with the restoration of order. Nevertheless, its descriptions probably reflect some memories and traditions about life just after the collapse of the Middle Kingdom.
 3. The exact location of Sharuhēn is unknown. Some scholars have identified it with Tell el-Far‘ah (S), while others place it at Tell el-‘Ajjul or Tell Abu Hurere (Tel Haror). See Kempinski (1974), Liwak (1992: Vol. 5, 1164), and Rainey (1993).
 4. This chronology is based on interconnections of archaeological artifacts from the Aegean, Egypt, and the Levant with dates derived from the chronology of ancient Egypt. The dates for the archaeological periods given here are derived from Cline (2008) and the charts inside the cover of Warburton (ed.) (2009a).
 5. This chronology depends on scientific dates for the eruption of Thera from ice cores, dendrochronology, and radiocarbon dating. See the section later in this chapter on “Debating the Evidence: Dating the Eruption of Thera and the End of LM I A.”
 6. However, recent radiocarbon dates from Tell-ed-Da’ba are, on average, 120 years older than the accepted historical dates of the excavator, Manfred Bietak. Either there is a problem in the sampling or methodology of the ^{14}C dating or we need to reinterpret the archaeological conclusions which form the basis of Bietak’s analysis (Höflmayer 2016).

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Egypt's Powerful Eighteenth Dynasty

After defeating the Hyksos and reunifying Egypt around 1540 BCE, the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty expanded Egyptian power over Nubia to the south and most of the Levant to the northeast. The resulting Egyptian Empire represents the height of prosperity and influence in Egyptian history. This is also the most creative period in Egypt, with extraordinary building projects and masterpieces in the arts. Egypt was the most significant power in the Near East until around 1300 BCE. Other large states, however, such as Mitanni in Syria, the Kas-site kingdom in Mesopotamia, and eventually the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia and Assyria in northern Babylonia, engaged in conflict and diplomacy with Egypt as well as with the smaller states of Syria-Palestine, western Anatolia, Cyprus, and the Mycenaean kingdoms in Greece and the Aegean. The internationalism established during this era would continue to the end of the Bronze Age c. 1200–1100 BCE (see [Chapter 9](#)). During the last half of the fourteenth century BCE, though, the powerful Egyptian Empire began to weaken and lose territory as the Hittite Empire strengthened and Pharaoh Akhenaton and his immediate successors perhaps concentrated their attention on religious reform and on the problems it created within Egypt.

The Beginning of the Egyptian New Kingdom (c. 1539–1480 BCE)

The Early Eighteenth Dynasty

Ahmosé, who reigned c. 1539–1515 BCE (see [Table 8.1](#)), was only a child when he became king, so his mother Ahhotep served as regent during the early years of his reign. She remained an important figure even after Ahmosé assumed control, and she is credited with military exploits in one of his stelae.

When he came of age, Ahmosé resumed his father's and brother's war

against the Hyksos and was successful in conquering Avaris around his eleventh regnal year. With the Hyksos rulers in the Delta defeated, Ahmose began reasserting Egyptian power in Palestine and Nubia. He attacked the fortress of Sharuhén in southern Palestine and captured it after several campaigns over a three-year span. He then conducted a campaign in Nubia and at some later time seems to have raided the coastal areas of Phoenicia and northern Palestine. By the time he died, Ahmose had reunified Egypt internally and restored her power and prestige abroad. The ancient Egyptians themselves thought these accomplishments so important that they made Ahmose the first king of a new dynasty, the Eighteenth, even though his father and brother were counted as members of the Seventeenth Dynasty. Present-day historians also see Ahmose's reign as the beginning of a new era, the period we call the New Kingdom.

Table 8.1 Chronology of the Eighteenth Dynasty

The New Kingdom	1539–1077
The Eighteenth Dynasty	1539–1292
Ahmose	1539–1515
Amenhotep (Amenophis) I	1514–1494
Thutmose (Tuthmosis) I	1493–1483
Thutmose (Tuthmosis) II	1482–1479
Hatshepsut	1479–1458
Thutmose (Tuthmosis) III	1479–1425
Amenhotep (Amenophis) II	1426–1400
Thutmose (Tuthmosis) IV	1400–1390
Amenhotep (Amenophis) III	1390–1353
Amenhotep IV/Akhenaton	1353–1336
Smenkhkare?	1338–1337?
Neferneferuaton	1336–1334?
Tutankhamun	1334–1326
Ay	1325–1320
Horemheb	1319–1292

Note: All dates are BCE and approximately correct, within about ±20 years. Because some scholars use the Greek forms of various royal names, these are given in parentheses.

Ahmose's Chief Wife was his sister, Ahmose Nefertari, and she seems to have been no less powerful than their mother, Ahhotep. Ahmose named her "God's Wife of Amun," a title and office in the cult of Amun that usually had been held by commoners. Now the king would have even more influence over a cult that was steadily growing in religious authority, and through its oracle

could also wield some political power. The office of God's Wife would continue to be a source of power and authority for a female from the royal family through the time of Hatshepsut. In fact, Ahmose Nefertari's power in religious affairs became so great that she and her son Amenhotep I were later jointly worshipped as patron deities by the Theban necropolis workers.

Amenhotep I, the oldest surviving son of Ahmose and Ahmose Nefertari, succeeded his father, reigning c. 1514–1494 BCE (see [Table 8.1](#)). Like his father and grandfather before him, Amenhotep I married one of his sisters, Meritamun, and made her his Chief Wife and God's Wife of Amun. Aside from a campaign in Nubia and possibly one in Libya, Amenhotep I's reign seems to have been peaceful. He continued his father's work of political consolidation and temple building, especially at the Temple of Amun at Karnak in Thebes.

The early Eighteenth Dynasty kings considered Amun their patron and protector, and they repaid him with lavish building projects and massive gifts of land and wealth. Amenhotep I and his successors not only built temples to Amun, but also emphasized Amun's cult to the extent of elevating him to supremacy within the Egyptian pantheon. Egypt's Twelfth Dynasty had begun the rise of this once relatively obscure Theban god. However, early in the Eighteenth Dynasty, he was assimilated with Re, the earlier divine patron of the monarchy, and became known as Amun-Re, King of the Gods.

During the early New Kingdom era, Memphis remained the site of the principal royal residence and, thus, Egypt's political capital. Thebes became the nation's religious capital, however, and the royal family periodically resided there in palaces near Karnak. The West Bank at Thebes also became the royal burial place. Following the lead of his Seventeenth Dynasty predecessors, Ahmose chose to be buried there. His tomb has not yet been identified, but it was located at Thebes, for his mummy was part of a cache of royal mummies found at Deir el-Bahri (see [Map 8.1](#)) in the late nineteenth century CE. Amenhotep I's mummy was also found in the cache, and a recently discovered tomb at Dra Abu el-Naga probably belonged to him. He was the first king to build his mortuary temple in a different location from his tomb. Amen-hotep I's successors followed his example, trying to make it more difficult for tomb robbers to find and despoil the royal burials. New Kingdom pharaohs had their tombs cut into the hills across the river from Thebes, first at Dra Abu el-Naga, then in the Valley of the Kings. Their mortuary temples were constructed at the edge of Thebes' western floodplain (see [Map 8.1](#)).

Amenhotep I seems to have been childless, and he was succeeded by Thutmose I, a general whose background is not known. It was once thought that Thutmose I, who reigned c. 1493–1483 BCE, gained his right to the throne by marrying one of Amenhotep I's daughters. However, Thutmose I's Chief

Debating the Evidence: The “Royal Heiress” Theory

There was a series of very powerful women during the late Seventeenth and early Eighteenth dynasties, including Tetisheri, Ahhotep, Ahmose Nefertari, and Hatshepsut. In addition, most of the women designated “King’s Chief Wife” during this era also had the title “God’s Wife of Amun” and were sisters of their respective husbands. Some scholars suggest that this “matriarchal tendency” may have been due to some Nubian ancestry in the Seventeenth-Eighteenth Dynasty line. It also led many Egyptologists to adopt what is called the “royal heiress theory.” This hypothesis claims that Egyptian society was matrilineal—that is, descent was traced through an individual’s mother rather than father. In the royal family, the theory goes, the right to the throne was transmitted through a line of “royal heiresses.” These women could not actually rule, but the men they married would. Thus, even a son of the king and his Chief Wife would have to marry his heiress sister in order to become pharaoh. This idea made the New Kingdom’s royal incestuous marriages more acceptable both to scholars and the general public.

Despite the popularity of this theory over the past century, it needs to be abandoned. As Gay Robins has shown, the hypothesized line of royal heiresses did not exist (Robins 1983, 1993: 26–27, 1999: 40). While Eighteenth Dynasty kings often married their sisters (as did the gods in Egyptian myths), they did not *always* do so. Furthermore, Ahmose (Chief Wife of Thutmose I), Satiah and Meritre Hatshepsut (successive Chief Wives of Thutmose III), Tiye (Chief Wife of Amenhotep III), and Nefertiti (Chief Wife of Akhenaten) were not daughters of the previous rulers. The evidence seems to indicate that the succession normally went to the oldest son of the king and his Chief Wife. If the king’s Chief Wife did not have a son, then the throne passed to the king’s oldest son by any of his other wives. Only if there were no sons might the throne pass to the husband of the oldest daughter of the king and his Chief Wife (as probably happened in the cases of Ay and Horemheb). However, as the successions of Thutmose I and Ramesses I show, even this last scenario did not always prevail.

The title “God’s Wife of Amun” once was thought to belong to the royal heiress as well. It supposedly referred to the myth that Amun himself impregnated the heiress to produce the next pharaoh. However, before the time of Ahmose, the God’s Wives were usually not from the royal family at all. The position of God’s Wife was de-emphasized after the death of Hatshepsut, and

after the reign of Thutmose IV, it disappeared for most of the rest of the Eighteenth Dynasty. It is now clear that this priestly cult position had nothing to do with succession to the throne (Robins 1993: 150–151, 1999: 40).

Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (c. 1479–1425 BCE)

Debating the Evidence: Hatshepsut Becomes King

Thutmose III's aunt and stepmother, Queen Hatshepsut, became regent for the child-king when his father died (c. 1479 BCE). The monuments show that for at least two years (and probably for at least two or three more), she kept her old titles of God's Wife and King's Chief Wife and was depicted dutifully standing behind the new pharaoh. However, by Thutmose III's seventh regnal year, she is depicted as king, coregent with her nephew, with all the typical pharaonic titles except "Mighty Bull." On at least four earlier occasions, women probably had ruled Egypt: Meritneith, Khentkawes, and Nitiquet during the Old Kingdom, and Sobekneferu at the end of the Twelfth Dynasty. However, only two of them, Nitiquet and Sobekneferu, were included in the king lists. Even so, it is not certain that they considered themselves pharaohs and were regarded as such rather than regents. With Hatshepsut, though, there is no question. She became *king*!

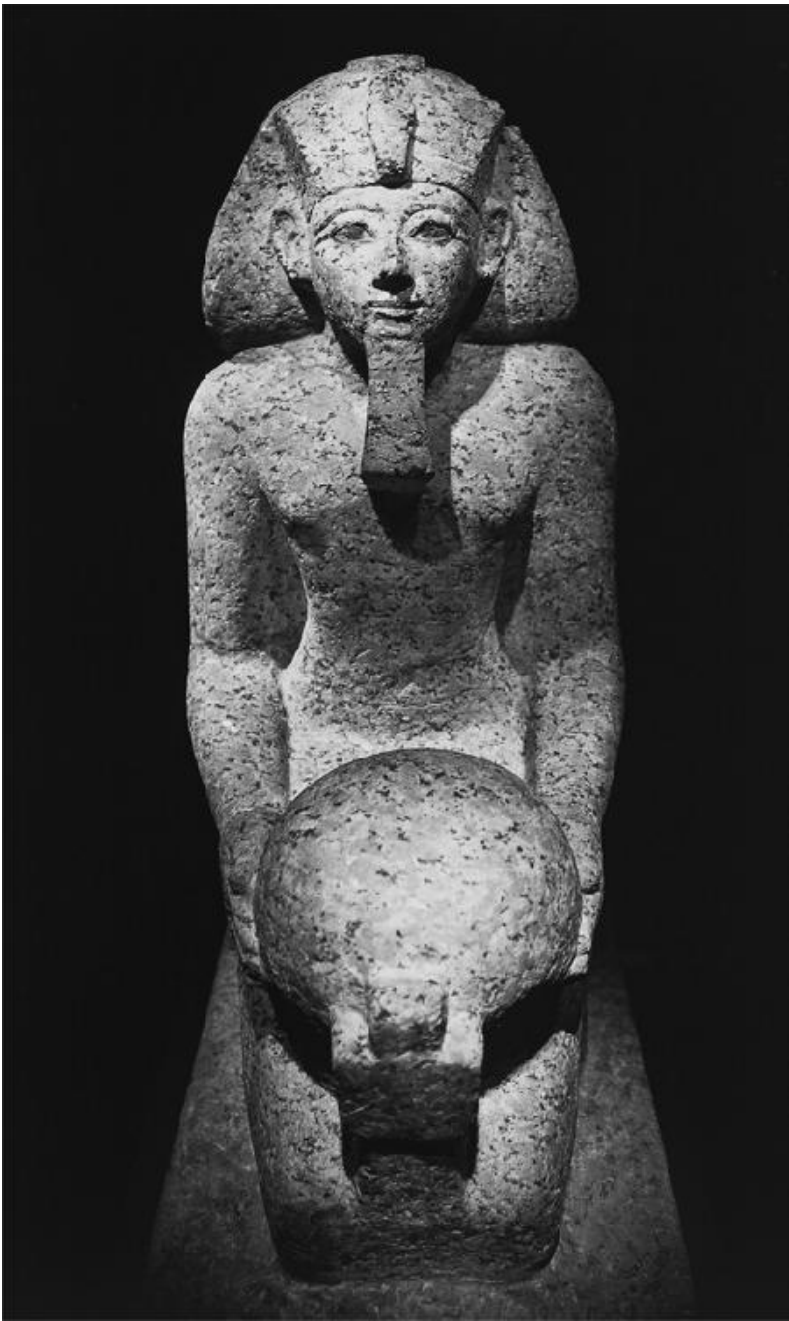


Figure 8.1 Hatshepsut Depicted as Pharaoh

© akg-images/De Agostini Picture Lib./C. Sappa.

Early in her kingship, Hatshepsut did not try to deny her female gender. Eventually, though, she came to be depicted as a male in the traditional garb and poses of past pharaohs (see [Figure 8.1](#)). On most of her statues, she wore

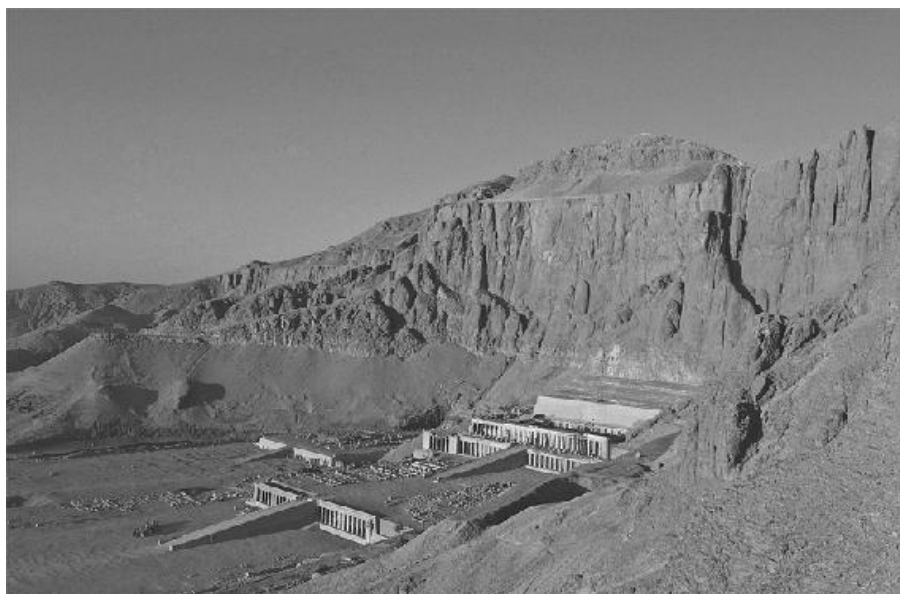
the royal beard, and in some inscriptions, scribes applied masculine titles and pronouns to her. Nonetheless, the scribes were aware that this “king” was female. So, often they used feminine titles for her such as “Daughter of Re” (rather than “Son of Re”) or “the female Horus” as well as referring to her with feminine pronouns. Kara Cooney argues that as Thutmose III grew into manhood (around fifteen or sixteen years of age), Hatshepsut had to modify her image to fit the traditional masculine imagery and ideology of kingship in order to continue to be seen as the senior co-regent (2014: 153–158).

It is not clear what precipitated Hatshepsut’s assumption of kingship. As regent she already ruled the country, but perhaps she decided that she had to formalize her power before Thutmose III became old enough to rule on his own. Some have suggested that there was a power struggle between two factions within the Egyptian bureaucracy. According to this view, Thutmose III and his supporters had to suffer in silence until the end of Hatshepsut’s reign. Then Thutmose took his revenge, destroying Hatshepsut’s statues, hacking her name out of inscriptions and eliminating all references to her reign (see, e.g., Gardiner 1961: 181–184; Clayton 1994: 102, 104). However, evidence has surfaced that shows that Thutmose III’s attack on Hatshepsut’s monuments and memory did not take place until very late in his reign, year forty-two or later. There is no evidence of conflict between the two while Hatshepsut was alive, nor did he seem to display much resentment in the years immediately following her death. Why wait at least twenty years to take his revenge? Thus, one of the main supports for the factional conflict hypothesis has been undermined.

Joyce Tyldesley argues that possibly “a sudden threat to the security of the immediate royal family, such as an insurrection in the royal harem, might well have prompted Hatshepsut [sic] to take drastic action to safeguard her stepson’s position” (1996: 113; see also Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 1, 193; E. Wilson 2006: 84). Kara Cooney also suggests that because of Thutmose’s youth and the fact that many children died before reaching adulthood, most high-ranking members of the bureaucracy probably supported Hatshepsut’s assumption of kingship as a way of preserving the Thutmoside family’s hold on the throne. Moreover, Hatshepsut had already demonstrated that she had the capacity to rule (Cooney 2014: 99–126). Of course, since at that time all the high officials in Egypt owed their positions to Hatshepsut or her father, preserving Hatshepsut’s power meant preserving their own positions as well.

The Reign of Hatshepsut

Soon after claiming the throne, Hatshepsut began building her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri in western Thebes. An official named Senenmut supervised construction of this beautiful temple. A man of humble origins, Senenmut became one of Hatshepsut's favorite administrators and the steward and tutor of her daughter, Neferure. Some scholars have suspected, though without much evidence, that he was also Hatshepsut's lover. Hatshepsut's temple, called *Djeser-Djeseru* ("Holy of Holies" or "The Most Sacred Place"), was located directly opposite the Temple of Amun at Karnak on the other side of the Nile (see [Map 8.1](#)). It was also right next to, and partially inspired by, the Middle Kingdom mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II. Its three colonnaded terraces harmonize perfectly with the hills behind it, leading many people to consider it the most beautiful structure in Egypt (see [Figure 8.2](#)). Its primary purpose was to house a mortuary chapel for Hatshepsut. However, she also added a smaller mortuary chapel for her father Thutmose I, and chapels for Hathor, Anubis, Re-Horakhty. and, most importantly, Amun. It became the location for the meeting of the cult statues of Amun and Hathor during one of the principal Egyptian religious festivals, "The Beautiful Feast of the Valley."



[Figure 8.2](#) The Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri, Thebes

The ruins of Mentuhotep's temple can be seen to the left of Hatshepsut's temple.

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To justify her rule, Hatshepsut had a political/mythical account of her birth carved on the walls of the northern half of the middle terrace of her mortuary temple (see [Document 8.1](#)). According to this story, Amun had disguised

himself as Hatshepsut's father Thutmose I and impregnated her mother Ahmose. Thus, Hatshepsut was the direct offspring of Amun and was destined to be pharaoh even before her birth. Furthermore, she states that her father Thutmose I made her his coregent and publicly designated her as his successor. Her claim, then, was that she had been pharaoh and coregent throughout the reigns of her brother/husband Thutmose II and of her stepson Thutmose III. Obviously, this is fiction, as Hatshepsut's lesser titles in inscriptions from the reign of Thutmose II and the beginning of the reign of Thutmose III show. Nonetheless, the ancient Egyptian belief in the magical potency of images and inscriptions suggests that just by placing this account within her temple, Hatshepsut was magically making it true.

Egyptian pharaohs had always claimed to be incarnations of the god Horus. Each king had also adopted the title "Son of Re," indicating his relationship to the sun god. A Middle Kingdom story even claims that the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty were triplet sons of Re through his union with their earthly mother. However, Hatshepsut probably was the first *living* ruler to claim to be the direct physical offspring of one of the major gods (in this case, Amun). Her birth narrative represents a more literalistic understanding of the ancient doctrine of the divine ruler in Egypt. Later pharaohs Amenhotep III, Akhenaton, and Ramesses II would follow her concept.

Hatshepsut also seems to have reshaped, if not created, the *Opet* Festival in Thebes. This festival featured a procession of the cult statues of Amun, the goddess Mut, and their son Khons from their temples at Karnak to a shrine at Luxor, known as the "Southern *Opet*" ("domicile" or "harem") of Amun. The earliest depictions of this festival come from Hatshepsut's time. A major part of the celebration centered on rituals at the Luxor shrine renewing the divine *ka* of the ruler and reemphasizing the king as the human embodiment of Amun-Re.

Document 8.1 Description of Hatshepsut's Conception

This text from Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri accompanied illustrations of Hatshepsut's conception and birth. It indicates that she was the direct offspring of Amun (spelled Amon below), divine from conception and birth, not just by virtue of her accession to the throne of Egypt. The translation is by James Breasted (1906: Vol. II, 80–81) with material in square brackets added by W. Stiebing.

Utterance of Amon-Re, lord of Thebes, presider over Karnak. He made his form like the majesty of this husband, the King Okheperkere (Thutmose I). He found her

[Ahmose, Thutmose I's Chief Wife] as she slept in the beauty of her palace. She waked at the fragrance of the god, which she smelled in the presence of his majesty. He went to her immediately, *coivit cum ea* [he had sexual intercourse with her], he imposed his desire upon her, he caused that she should see him in his form of a god. When he came before her, she rejoiced at the sight of his beauty, his love passed into her limbs, which the fragrance of the god flooded; all his odors were from Punt.

Utterance by the king's-wife and king's-mother Ahmose, in the presence of the majesty of this august god, Amon, Lord of Thebes: "How great is thy fame! It is splendid to see thy front; thou hast united my majesty (fem.) with thy favors, thy dew is in all my limbs." After this, the majesty of this god did all that he desired with her.

Utterance of Amon, Lord of the Two Lands, before her: "Khnemet-Amon-Hatshepsut shall be the name of this my daughter, whom I have placed in thy body, this saying which comes out of thy mouth. She shall exercise the excellent king-ship in this whole land. My soul is hers, my bounty is hers, my crown is hers, that she may rule the Two Lands, that she may lead all the living."

Hatshepsut ruled Egypt for twenty-one years (c. 1479–1458 BCE) while her younger core-gent trained with the army, acquiring and sharpening his military skills. She conducted at least two military campaigns against Nubia and probably another in southern Palestine. However, these early military actions seem to have been sufficient to maintain Egypt's interests in both areas. Thus, Hatshepsut was able to concentrate her attention on maintaining prosperity within Egypt and on the construction of monuments. One of the most important events of her reign was the success of a trade expedition to Punt. This mysterious land was probably located near the southern end of the Red Sea along the East African coast between southern Sudan and northern Somalia. Hatshepsut's fleet returned with a cargo of potted myrrh trees, spices, ivory, gold, electrum, ebony, exotic animal skins, apes, dogs, and some natives of Punt. The spice trees were planted on the middle terrace of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, and the story of the expedition was depicted on the walls of the southern half of that terrace.

She must also have courted relations with the Aegean civilizations. Part of the palace at Avaris dated to the joint reign of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III was decorated with frescoes with Minoan themes and was presumably crafted by Minoan artisans. The excavator Manfred Bietak (2008) thinks that a Minoan princess may have lived here, married to one of the Thutmoside kings (see also Podany 2010: 148–149).

As king, Hatshepsut could not perform her former duties as God's Wife of Amun. So, she bestowed the position of God's Wife on her daughter, Neferure. Her daughter also appears in scenes where the king's Great Wife would have been depicted in earlier times. It is possible that Hatshepsut was grooming Neferure to follow in her footsteps and become Thutmose III's coregent.

However, Neferure seems to have died (or been removed) soon after her mother's death, ending any possible plans for a line of female pharaohs (Dodson and Hilton 2004: 131–132; Cooney 2014: 200–202, 273, note 18).

The Sole Rule of Thutmose III

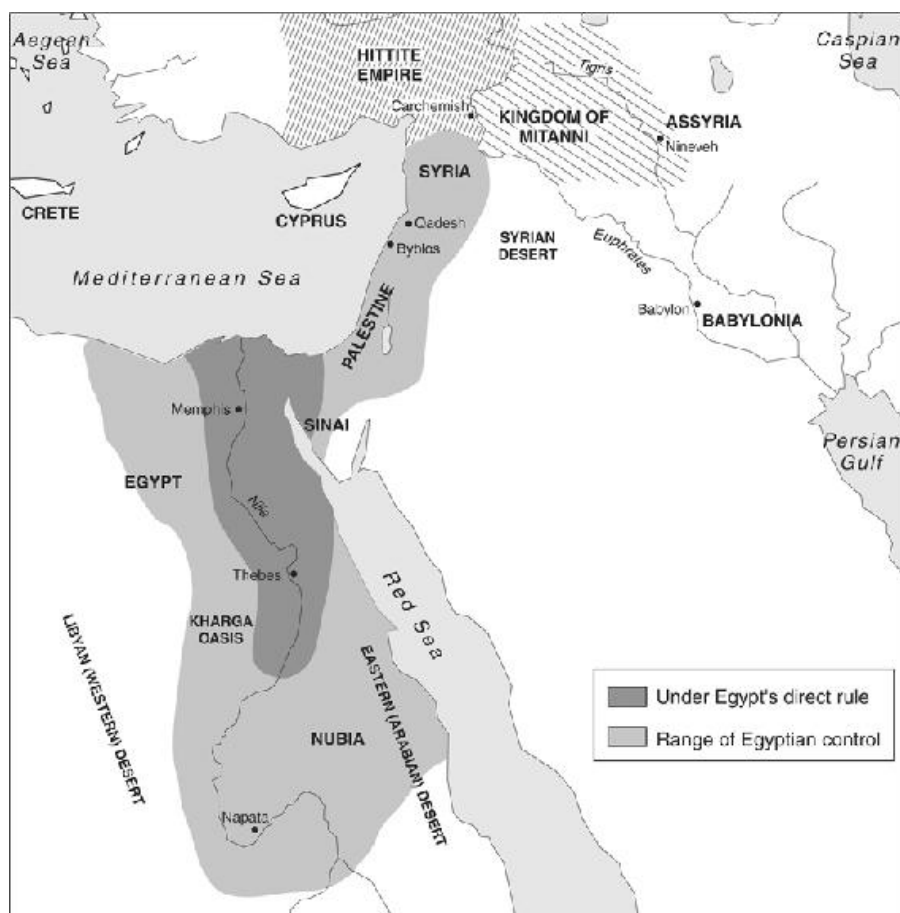
Hatshepsut died around 1458 BCE, probably of cancer (assuming her mummy has been correctly identified).² Thutmose III, now about 22–23 years old, was finally pharaoh in his own right. About this time, a crisis developed in Syria-Palestine. The Mitanni Kingdom had begun expanding its power into western Syria, and its growing strength led the rulers of several Syrian and Palestinian cities to abandon their allegiance to Egypt. The Hittite Empire had also been expanding southward along the Syrian coast. Thutmose III reacted swiftly to these events, leading an army into Canaan in the spring of the first full year of his independent rule (c. 1457). At Megiddo, a fortress in northern Palestine guarding the main road into Syria, a coalition of Canaanite rulers awaited him. Thutmose III led his troops through a narrow pass over the hills rather than along the wider roads around them, catching his opponents by surprise. The Canaanite forces were decisively defeated, though it took a seven-month siege before Megiddo itself fell.

During the next thirty years Thutmose conducted sixteen more campaigns in Palestine and Syria, culminating with the capture of Qadesh. The strength of the Kingdom of Mitanni seems to have been perceived as the major threat to Egypt. So, the warrior pharaoh led raids across the Euphrates River into Mitanni's territory, blunting Mitanni's westward expansion. Southwestern Syria and Palestine were placed firmly under Egyptian control with garrisons stationed at key cities. To keep Canaanite subject kings loyal, Thutmose III took their sons as hostages to Egypt. There they were educated and immersed into Egyptian culture so that they became reliable vassals when they returned home to rule their city-states.

Thutmose III also conducted campaigns in Nubia, pushing Egyptian control southward to Napata and the fourth cataract and continued diplomatic and commercial contacts with Minoan rulers. His brilliant military tactics and his ability to organize subject territories into a stable Egyptian Empire (see [Map 8.2](#)) caused the great American Egyptologist James Breasted to consider him the “Napoleon” of ancient Egypt. Clearly, such a comparison was well deserved.

Late in his reign, Thutmose III began systematically destroying all traces of the reign of Hatshepsut. Her name was chiseled off monuments, her statues

were destroyed, and references to her reign were deleted from documents and king lists. Because he waited so long to begin this attack, it is likely that something other than spite and personal hatred were involved. As he aged and began looking toward the reign of his son, Thutmose may have considered the era of Hatshepsut's dominance an affront against *ma'at*. Moreover, as his son was still a child who might need a female regent if Thutmose died in the near future, Hatshepsut's assumption of kingship might become a dangerous precedent. The elimination of all trace of the female king's reign probably seemed the best way to assure Amenhotep II and future male rulers a smooth succession (Robins 1993: 51–52; 2006: 70; Tyldesley 1996: 216–226; Cooney 2014: 219–223). However, Thutmose III lived to see his son reach adulthood, and late in his reign, he made Amenhotep II his coregent (c. 1427 or 1426 BCE). Only a year or two later, the old king died and Amenhotep II became sole pharaoh with no signs of opposition.



Map 8.2 The Egyptian Empire c. 1430 BCE

This map depicts the areas under Egyptian control near the end of the reign of Thutmose III. Adapted from William Dunstan, *The Ancient Near East* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1998), p. 137.

The Egyptian Empire at Its Height (c. 1425–1350 BCE)

The Reigns of Amenhotep II and Thutmose IV

Amenhotep II (c. 1426–1400 BCE) followed in the footsteps of his illustrious father. He was a warrior whose strength and skill with a bow became legendary. Bas-reliefs show him piercing thick copper targets with his arrows while charging in his chariot. Mitannian and Hittite subversion were still threats, so early in his reign, Amenhotep II undertook a military campaign across the Orontes River in Syria. He brought back the bodies of seven Syrian rulers he had slain. A stele he erected at Amada in Nubia claims that

six of these enemies were hanged on the face of the enclosure wall of Thebes, the hands likewise, and the other enemy was shipped up to Nubia and hanged upon the enclosure wall of Napata in order to cause to be seen the victorious might of His Majesty for ever and ever.

(Gardiner 1961: 200)

Amenhotep II also conducted several military actions against wavering vassals in Palestine. After one of these campaigns, he returned to Egypt with more than 2,200 prisoners, 820 horses, and 730 chariots and their equipment, as well as many precious objects of silver and gold.

Among the various groups of people mentioned in the lists of captives from Amenhotep II's campaigns in Syria and Palestine are *maryannu* and Hurrians. *Maryannu* originally was a Hurrian term applied to trained chariot warriors, and by Amenhotep II's time, this term was also being applied to Canaanite chariot warriors. The presence of many Hurrians in coastal Syria and Palestine demonstrates how widespread the movements of this group had been c. 1600 to 1550 BCE. Egypt viewed these population movements and continuing attempts by Mitanni to expand westward as dangerous threats to Egyptian interests. Almost certainly, Mitannian power and aggrandizement provided the main impetus for the Asiatic campaigns of Thutmose I, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II.

Amenhotep II was succeeded by Thutmose IV, who probably had not always been the crown prince. This conclusion is suggested (but not proved) by a propagandistic stele he erected between the paws of the Great Sphinx at Giza. Many scholars have seen this stele as an attempt to explain an unlikely accession or to justify a usurpation of the throne. The text claims that once, while on a hunting trip, Thutmose fell asleep in the Sphinx's shadow. In a dream, the sun god embodied in the Sphinx told the young prince that he would become pharaoh if he cleared away the sand covering the Sphinx's body. Thutmose complied, and the god kept his promise. Thus, a likely, though not necessary, conclusion is that Thutmose IV was a younger son of Amenhotep II who succeeded to the throne only after the premature death of one or more older brothers.

The reign of Thutmose IV (c. 1400–1390 BCE) was essentially a peaceful one. Mitanni, stung by the earlier Egyptian attacks and now facing the growing power of the Hittites and Assyria, decided to make peace with Egypt. After a series of negotiations, the two former enemies agreed to become allies. The new relationship was sealed by the marriage of a daughter of Artatama, King of Mitanni, to Thutmose IV. The Egyptian-Mitannian alliance protected both powers against the threat of Hittite aggression and brought almost fifty years of peace to the Egyptian Empire in the Levant.

The New Egyptian Army

The New Kingdom Egyptian military forces that defeated the Hyksos and conquered Nubia and Syria-Palestine were quite different from Egyptian armies of earlier times. The Egyptians adopted new weapons, especially the chariot, brought to Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, changing the structure and tactics of their military. Horse-drawn chariots provided fast mobile platforms from which archers could fire volleys of arrows at their enemies. Chariots usually carried two warriors, a driver, and an archer, though Hittite chariots are shown carrying three—a driver, a shield carrier, and an archer (see [Figure 8.3](#)). Chariot divisions could outmaneuver infantry forces, getting around them to attack from the flank or the rear. They could cross back and forth across the enemy's front, firing arrows into the massed troops to weaken them before a charge by their own infantry, or they could charge through the enemy's infantry ranks, scattering the soldiers. In close-quarter fighting, the chariot warrior might use javelins or a sword instead of his bow. If both sides in a battle had chariot forces, as they generally did, the chariot divisions usually attacked one another. The enemy's chariots had to be

neutralized or destroyed before the infantry could be attacked. The skill of the drivers and the accuracy of the archers as well as the numbers of chariots involved became decisive in such encounters. The Egyptians soon proved to be exceptionally skilled in making fast, durable light chariots, and the training and skill of their drivers and archers usually gave them the advantage in battle.



Figure 8.3 The Battle of Qadesh

This image is depicted in Ramesses II's temple at Abu Simbel. It shows Egyptian chariots (left) attacking Hittite chariots (right) during the battle.

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

As mentioned in [Chapter 7](#), the powerful composite bow was the weapon of choice for chariot warriors during the Late Bronze Age (c. 1540–1150). However, composite bows were expensive and difficult to make, so few of the soldiers or chariot warriors of small kingdoms or tribal groups possessed them. Only the larger kingdoms could produce them in ample numbers. This fact gave the armies of Egypt, Hatti, Mitanni, and other great powers an important advantage against the forces of smaller states. Other weapons generally used by military forces during this time include long thrusting spears, javelins, curved sickle swords, narrow axes designed to pierce rather than cut, and toward the end of the era, long slashing swords.

Egypt had a standing army in the New Kingdom as it had in the Middle Kingdom. Royal recruiting officers toured the villages, forcing one man in ten

into compulsory military service. Some men, of course, volunteered for duty, especially in the chariot corps. The young males of the upper class used chariots for hunting and racing, and they were expected to follow their king into battle. Some of these members of the elite became professional soldiers, forming the Egyptian officer corps. Hired groups of Libyans, “Sea Peoples” from the Aegean area, and other mercenaries supplemented the native Egyptian forces. In addition, auxiliary troops from the conquered areas—charioteers and infantry from Syria-Palestine and archers from Nubia—fought alongside the Egyptian divisions.

During the early part of the New Kingdom, the Egyptian army consisted of two infantry divisions, each containing 5,000 men (probably at least half of them mercenaries). Each division had almost 2,000 bowmen, while most of the remaining soldiers were armed with spears, axes, or sickle swords and leather-covered wooden shields. The contingents from the Sea Peoples were usually armed with long slashing swords and round shields. The basic unit of the army was the platoon of fifty men. Five platoons made up a 250-man company, and there were twenty companies in each division. During the reign of Seti I, the number of army divisions was increased to three, and under Ramesses II, to four.

The basic unit of the chariot forces was a squadron of fifty chariots. At the beginning of the New Kingdom, the entire Egyptian chariot division contained only about 100 to 150 chariots. However, by the time of Thutmose III, the Egyptians deployed about 1,000 chariots, and when Ramesses II met the Hittites at the battle of Qadesh, there seem to have been about 3,500 chariots on each side.

Amenhotep III, “The Magnificent”

Egypt now entered into one of the most tranquil and prosperous periods in its history. Amen-hotep III (reigned c. 1390–1353 BCE), son of Thutmose IV and his Chief Wife, Mutemwiya, was probably only about ten to twelve years old when he became pharaoh.³ Despite his youth, in his third year of rule, Amenhotep III married Tiy, an even younger girl of nonroyal ancestry. However, her father, Yuya, was an important official who held a high military position. Tiy eventually bore her husband at least four daughters and two sons, including the future pharaoh, Amenhotep IV. Two of her daughters, Sitamun and Isis, married their father during the last decade of his reign and, like their mother, each received the title “Chief Royal Wife.” However, Tiy not only became Amenhotep III’s Chief Wife, she also attained more preeminence and

authority than any preceding queen. Major inscriptions almost always linked her name with that of her husband, and she was portrayed as a sphinx trampling Egypt's enemies, an image hitherto reserved for pharaohs.

There seem to have been only two insignificant campaigns in Nubia during Amenhotep III's reign of about thirty-eight years. He was able to live a life of luxury and ease, enjoying the fruits of the empire his predecessors had created. He continued the alliance with Mitanni, sealed by his marriage to Gilukhepa, daughter of King Shuttarna II. Later, shortly before his death, Amenhotep III also married Tadukhepa, daughter of Tushratta, the new Mitannian ruler. Likewise, he maintained good relations with Babylon, adding a sister and a daughter of the Babylonian king Kadashman-Enlil to his harem.

With Egyptian strength and diplomacy preserving the peace in the Levant and Nubia, Amenhotep III turned his attention to building monuments, surpassing even the volume of construction undertaken by Hatshepsut and Thutmose III. He erected more statues of himself throughout Egypt than any other pharaoh. Many of them were usurped and modified by later rulers, especially Ramesses II. Amenhotep III built the Serapeum at Saqqara for the Apis bulls sacred to Ptah, and temples for other gods at Heliopolis, Athribis, Bubastis, El-Kab, Abydos, Hermopolis, and other sites. He also constructed many sanctuaries in Nubia. His most important building projects, however, were at Thebes. There, at Malqata on the west bank, Amenhotep III built a large palace for himself named "Mansion of Nebma'atre-is-the-Dazzling-Aton (the Solar Orb)." (Nebma'atre, "Re is Lord of *Ma'at*," was the *praenomen* of Amenhotep III.) Though built largely of mud-brick, like all Egyptian dwellings, it was elaborately decorated with beautiful paintings on its walls and plastered floors. It became his permanent residence during the last decade of his reign. Moored at a huge lake he had dug in front of this palace was the royal barge named *The Dazzling Aton* or *Aton Gleams* on which the king and queen sailed during religious and state festivals. Nearby, Amenhotep III also constructed his luxurious mortuary temple, parts of which were covered with gold, silver, and electrum (an alloy made of gold and silver). In keeping with Amenhotep III's increasing emphasis on solar worship, the sanctuary in this mortuary establishment was a large open solar court like the Fifth Dynasty solar temples. On either side of the temple's main entrance pylon stood two 64-foot-high seated statues of the king. Unfortunately, Merneptah later used Amenhotep III's mortuary temple as a quarry to obtain stone for his own constructions. Today, the huge statues, called the Colossi of Memnon (see [Figure 8.4](#)), are among the few elements that remain.



Figure 8.4 The Colossi of Memnon (Amenhotep III) at Thebes

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.



Figure 8.5 Amenhotep III's Papyriform-Columned Court at the Luxor Temple, Thebes

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

On the east bank at Thebes, Amenhotep III raised a new monumental gateway (the Third Pylon) for the Temple of Amun at Karnak. He also erected

new temples nearby for Mut, Amun's consort, and Montu, a war god. At the southern end of Thebes (now called Luxor), he replaced Hatshepsut's small shrine for Amun with a magnificent new temple. His beautiful papyriform-columned open court (see [Figure 8.5](#)) and the seven pairs of huge columns that originally formed the temple's entrance colonnade are still the most impressive parts of this monument. He also connected the Luxor temple with that of Karnak by an avenue of sphinxes so that Amun, Mut, and Khons could travel majestically between their two homes, especially during the *Opet* Festival, the most important yearly religious festival at Thebes.

The Luxor temple was dedicated both to Amun (in the form of the fertility god Min) and to the divine royal *ka*. This made it the perfect spot for Amenhotep III to emphasize his own divinity. In a room within the sanctuary, he depicted his conception as the result of a sexual liaison between Amun and Queen Mutemwiya, a story copied from Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri. Amenhotep III also declared his divinity in other ways. Statues of the gods that he erected had Amenhotep's own features. The temple he built at Soleb in Nubia was dedicated to the worship of Amun and to a deified form of himself as Lord of Nubia. Furthermore, he claimed divinity for Queen Tiy as well. In Egypt, artists often made her representation the same size as that of her divine husband, and portrayed her as the personification of the goddess Ma'at. And at Sedeinga in Nubia, Tiy had her own temple where she was worshipped as the embodiment of the goddesses Hathor and Tefnut, both representing the female principle of creation.

Amenhotep III increasingly emphasized the sun god during his reign, especially under the name of Aton, whose name was included in the names of his palace and royal barge. He also named a division of the army "Nebma'atre is the Dazzling Aton" and his youngest daughter was named Beketaton ("Handmaiden of Aton"). The word *aton* originally referred to the physical shining ball that we see in the sky. It is usually translated "sun disk," but "solar orb" would be better, for bas-relief sculptures make it clear that the Egyptians thought of the sun as a sphere. However, during the Middle and New kingdoms, *aton* came to be used also as another name for Re, the sun as a deity. By the time of Amenhotep III, there was a temple to Aton in Heliopolis, for inscriptions from his reign mention a "Steward in the Temple of Aton" and a "Scribe of the Treasury of the Temple of Aton."

Amenhotep III celebrated a *heb-sed* (Jubilee Festival) in his thirtieth year and then two others in years thirty-four and thirty-seven. At the first of these rites designed to restore the vitality of the king, Amenhotep III seems to have elevated himself to full godhood (Dodson 2014: 53–54). He had already been worshipped as a god in Nubia, but now he is depicted worshipping himself as a god in Egypt as well. During the festival he proclaimed himself the earthly

embodiment of the Aton, and choirs sang hymns to Tiy as the incarnation of Hathor. For the rest of Amenhotep III's reign, his courtiers greeted him every morning as the image and personification of the sun god, Aton. The stage was set for his son to stretch the doctrine of the divine king to its furthest limits.

Amarna Age Diplomacy: The Brotherhood of Kings

Under Amenhotep and his successors in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE, the major states of the Near East created an international system of diplomacy that is often referred to by modern scholars as the "Club of Great Powers" or the "Club of Royal Brothers" (Liverani 2000: 15–27; Bryce 2003: 76–94; Collins 2008: 47–70). In 1887 CE, a peasant woman digging at El-Amarna, Egypt, for decomposed stone and brick to use as fertilizer found a cache containing more than 370 cuneiform tablets. These documents represented diplomatic correspondence from the last years of Amenhotep III through the beginning of the reign of Tutankhamun. Because of the location where they were found, they are usually called the Amarna Letters (and in citations are designated EA for "El-Amarna"). They include forty-two letters from kings of major states, while the rest are from Egyptian vassals in Canaan. They provide welcome information not only on conditions within Egyptian-controlled Palestine and coastal Syria, but also on the foreign relations of the entire Near East. Using the Akkadian language, the major kingdoms of the Near East recognized one another as "Great Kings" and maintained economic and diplomatic ties under the rhetoric of "brotherhood."

This "brotherhood" was a mutually beneficial diplomatic relationship between two states, which was maintained and solidified through "greeting-gifts" (more often resembling commercial exchanges rather than gifts) and marriages. At first the partnerships included only Egypt, Mitanni, and Babylon; however, through the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries as the power of some states waxed and waned, other kingdoms such as Arzawa (western Turkey), the Hittites, Assyria, Alasiya (Cyprus) and even Ahhiyawa (the Mycenaeans) were included in the diplomatic Amarna network and recognized as Great Kings. Despite the shifts in power over the centuries, the system of international alliances and diplomacy managed to survive until all of the major powers declined or were destroyed at the end of the Bronze Age. (For this material and what follows in this section, see Bryce 2003; Podany 2010: 191–309; Cline 2014: 51–60). The network of friendship and exchange fostered by the reciprocal contacts of the royal courts helped bolster the elites, giving them preferential access to controlled luxury goods. It did not, however,

curb international skirmishes, which, as we will see, broke out between Hatti and Egypt, and between Assyria and Hatti, Mitanni, and Babylonia. Moreover, despite the declarations of brotherhood, Amenhotep III erected a series of statues in his mortuary temple at Thebes listing Babylonia, Hatti, Mitanni, Crete, and Greece as tributary foreigners.

Despite the great distances involved, communication between the various royal courts of the Near East was achieved through the continual travel between them of high-level messengers carrying letters from kings to their “brother” rulers and even letters from queens to their “sisters.” They also carried “passports,” tablets stating their role as messengers for a Great King. These sealed tablets were designed to protect the messengers from interference by vassal rulers and to prevent local officials from trying to tax whatever goods they carried with them. Such “passports” usually were effective. However, in one instance when Babylonian merchants who had accompanied an envoy on his way to Egypt were robbed and killed in Palestine, Babylonian King Burnaburiash II demanded that Pharaoh Akhenaton punish the murderers and compensate Babylon for the goods taken (letter EA 8, Moran 1992: 16–17). Royal envoys usually rode in chariots, but they were normally accompanied by soldiers and servants (and occasionally princesses and their train), some of whom would have been on foot. Then, when the messenger reached his destination after several weeks of travel, he would spend several more weeks or months at the foreign court attending banquets and visiting with the ruler and other dignitaries. A messenger seems to have been trusted by his king not only to deliver the letter he carried, but also to answer questions about it and interpret his ruler’s meaning. After a time, the messenger would be allowed to return home, usually accompanied by a messenger from the king he had been visiting. An entire round trip usually took about four months, though some lasted much longer.

Each king tried to impress his “brothers” with his wealth and power. So, a royal envoy usually carried not only a letter from his king to a brother king, but also gifts of precious metals and expensive luxury goods. Rulers often complained of the quantity or quality of the gifts they had been given (see [Document 8.2](#)). In two letters, Burnaburiash II complains that some of the gold he had been sent by the Egyptian pharaoh was alloyed rather than pure. In one case he melted down a gift of forty minas of gold (about fifty pounds) and wound up with only ten minas (c. 12.5 pounds) of pure gold, and in the other instance twenty minas of Egyptian “gold” yielded less than five minas of real gold (EA 7: 71–72 and EA 10: 20–24, Moran 1992: 14, 19). Even so, the pharaoh’s vassals as well as his “brother” kings eagerly sought “Egyptian” gold (which the pharaohs actually obtained mostly from Nubia). In a letter from Tushratta to Akhenaton, the Mitannian king asks for large quantities of gold as

a bride price so that he can build a mausoleum, justifying his request by remarking that in Egypt “gold is as plentiful as dirt” (EA 19:59–70, Moran 1992: 44–45). The Assyrian king also tells the Egyptian pharaoh that “gold in your country is as dirt” (EA 16, Moran 1992: 39).

In addition to gold, silver, bronze, semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli, chalcedony, and onyx (either pure or made into vessels, jewelry, statues, or other objects), fine cloth, cosmetics, perfumes, oils, chariots, thrones, and other elaborate furniture, the rulers sometimes also exchanged physicians, sculptors, architects, masons, and other skilled workers (Cline 2014: 58–60). Though sometimes the gifts exchanged were small and symbolic, at times they could be enormous. One collection of gifts that Akhenaton sent to Babylon (probably in exchange for a Babylonian bride) contained over half a ton of gold, an eighth of a ton of silver, and more than a third of a ton of bronze (EA 14, see Moran 1992: xxv; Podany 2010: 220). At today’s prices, the value of the metal alone—apart from the workmanship and artistic value of the objects to which it was applied or into which it was formed—would be well over \$25 million.

Alliances were cemented not only by gifts, but also by royal marriages (see [Document 8.2](#)). Several princesses were sent from Mitanni to become the wives of successive Egyptian pharaohs, and Amenhotep III and Akhenaton each seem to have received at least one Babylonian princess as a bride. However, Egypt, secure in its preeminence, refused to send any of its princesses to Mitanni or Babylon. When a Babylonian king (probably Kadashman-Enlil) asked to marry the daughter of an Egyptian king (probably Amenhotep III), he was told that no daughter of a pharaoh had ever been given to “anyone” (i.e., anyone outside of Egypt or the Egyptian royal family). The Babylonian ruler would not give up, though. He begged pharaoh to send a beautiful Egyptian woman to Babylon as if she were the pharaoh’s daughter. Who in Babylon would know the difference (EA 4, Moran 1992: 8–9)? But despite the Babylonian king’s pleas, no Egyptian woman was sent to his court. Nevertheless, the presence of Babylonian and Mitannian princesses at the Egyptian court helped to keep the peace between the Great Kings. And it is important to note that when Hatti rose to power and clashed with Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE ([Chapter 9](#)), the eventual peace between them was sealed by the marriage of a Hittite princess to the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II.

Document 8.2 An Amarna Letter from Babylon

The Amarna letters between Great Kings often relate to gifts and marriages—the two ties that bound the kings together and maintained

peaceful relations between them. In this letter sent from Kadashman-Enlil of Babylonia (Karduniyash) to Amenhotep III regarding a proposed marriage of Amenhotep with a Babylonian princess, one can see how the emphasis on “brotherhood” between the kings is almost entirely geared towards the acquisition of goods (in this case gold from Egypt). The kings extend “invitations” to festivals and celebrations in each other’s courts even though it is understood that they will never attend. The true intent of almost all of the letters that have survived is the transfer of luxury goods from one royal court to another, a system of exchange that seems to have supplanted the independent commercial networks of earlier periods. This letter, designated El Amarna 3 (EA 3), was translated by William Moran (1992: 7).

[S]ay [to Nim]u’wareya, the king of Eg[ypt m]y [brother]: [Thus Kad]Ashman-Enlil, the king of Karduniyash, your brother. [For me all indeed goes w]ell. For your household, your wives, [and for your sons], your country, your chariots, your horses, your [mag]nates may all go very well.

With regard to the girl, my daughter about whom you wrote to me in view of marriage, she has become a woman; she is nubile. Just send a delegation to fetch her. Previously, my father would send a messenger to you, and you would not detain him for long. You quickly sent him off, and you would also send here to my father a beautiful greeting-gift.

But now when I sent a messenger to you, you have detained him for six years, and you have sent me as my greeting-gift, the only thing in six years, 30 minas of gold that *looked like silver*. That gold was melted down in the presence of Kasi, your messenger, and he was a witness. When you celebrated a great festival, you did not send your messenger to me, saying, “Come t[o eat an]d drink.” No[r did you send me] my greeting-gift in connection with the festival. It was just 30 minas of gold that you [sent me]. My [gi]ft [*does not amount*]t to what [*I have given you*] every year.

I have built a [ne]w [house]. I[n my house] I have built a [l]arge [...]. Your messengers have see[n the house and the.. and are pleased. No]w I am going to have a house-opening. Come [yourself] to eat and drink with me. [*I shall not act a*]s you yourself did. [25 men and] women, altogether 50 i[n my service], I send [to you in connection with the house opening].

[...] for 10 wooden chariots, [and 10 teams of hor]ses I send to you as your greeting-gift.

Late Bronze Age Canaan (Palestine and Coastal Syria)

Egyptian control over Palestine and coastal Syria, attained largely through the efforts of Thutmose I, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II, continued until almost 1150 BCE. The pharaohs’ destructive attacks, especially those of Thutmose I (c.

1504–1490 BCE), seem to have marked the archaeological transition from Canaan’s Middle Bronze II C (or Middle Bronze III) era to its Late Bronze Period. Archaeological excavations and surveys show that there were fewer towns and cities in Late Bronze Canaan (c. 1500–1150 BCE) than there had been in the Middle Bronze Age, and those settlements that remained were often smaller than before. This suggests that the Canaanite population seriously declined during the period of Egyptian control. Egyptian military campaigns and the tribute exacted by the pharaohs were probably major reasons for this decline, though other factors such as plague and climatic conditions probably contributed to it as well. Despite the population decline, though, widespread trade and internationalism characterized this era in Canaan. Canaanite cities exchanged products with Egypt, naturally, but also with other regions of the eastern Mediterranean, especially Cyprus, Crete, and Greece.

Thutmose III’s systematic conquests in the Levant and his subsequent establishment of garrison towns in Palestine brought the region under direct imperial control. The Amarna Letters describe the political situation of the fourteenth century BCE under his successors. Though they recognized the suzerainty of Egypt, the vassal rulers of Amurru, Gubal (Byblos), Tyre, Sidon, Jerusalem, Gezer, and some other Canaanite city-states seem to have been in almost constant conflict with one another (see [Map 4.1](#) in [Chapter 4](#)). They competed for territory, power, and wealth either by defeating (or even murdering) rival princes or by writing letters to pharaoh denouncing them as enemies of Egypt. Each petty king accused his neighbors of treason, proclaimed himself Egypt’s only loyal vassal, and asked pharaoh to support him against his enemies. Furthermore, near the end of the Amarna Period, the Hittites seem to have tried to use these rivalries to bring some of Egypt’s subject cities into the Hittite sphere (see [Chapter 9](#)).

It is tempting to see the Amarna Letters from Egypt’s Canaanite vassals as evidence that Amenhotep III and his successor, Akhenaton, had little interest in the empire and were letting it fall apart. On the contrary, the continual reports to the pharaoh on the state of affairs in Canaan demonstrate the interest and involvement of pharaoh personally. Such conflict between rival vassals seems to have been the normal state of affairs in Canaan, even during the height of Egyptian power.

In the Amarna Letters, one of the charges various Canaanite rulers level against their rivals is that they are aiding or becoming *Habiru* (or better, *Hapiru*). These people are almost certainly the same as the ‘*Apiru*’ mentioned in various Egyptian texts from the time of Amenhotep II onward. The word *Habiru* (as it was originally transcribed) is very similar to “Hebrew” (‘*bri* in Hebrew), and many scholars have argued for a connection between them. Some scholars have even contended that the Amarna Letters were describing

the Israelite conquest of Canaan under Joshua (see, e.g., Meek 1960: 21–23; Bimson 1981: 227; Merrill 2008: 117–125). However, study of cuneiform literature has shown that the *Hapiru* were known for too long a time and were active over too wide an area for us to equate them with the biblical Hebrews. It is also clear that *Hapiru* is not an ethnic term—the people so designated come from many different ethnic groups. This point is illustrated in the Amarna Letters by the fact that various groups or individuals, even city-state rulers, might *become Hapiru*. The word was a term of contempt for dissident individuals or groups who separated themselves from their society and, depending upon circumstances, became renegades, mercenaries, bandits, refugees, hired laborers, or settled retainers (Greenberg 1955: 86–96; Halligan 1983: 21–22). The *Hab/piru* therefore are not the biblical Hebrews, although some early Israelites may have come from among that group, bringing with them the linguistic designation (see, e.g., Rainey 2008: 51–55).

Further light is thrown on this period in Canaan (the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries BCE) by an archive of cuneiform texts found at Ugarit on the coast of northern Syria. Ugarit was a coastal city of great importance sitting at the crossroads of the Egyptian controlled Levant and the Hittite-controlled regions of northern Syria between whom her loyalty vacillated. Excavations at the site over the last ninety years have unearthed a fabulous palace and thousands of cuneiform documents from the Late Bronze Age. In addition to valuable historical and linguistic information, the Ugaritic texts provide examples of the epic literature and religious mythology prevalent in this area. Mythological texts concern El (creator god and head of the pantheon), Asherah (fertility goddess and El's consort), Ba'al (the storm god), Yamm (the chaotic Sea), and Mot (Death)—Canaanite deities who find parallels in the Bible. They indicate how much Canaanite concepts and cult practices influenced those of the early Israelites.

Many of the tablets found at Ugarit were written in Akkadian, some in Sumerian and Hurrian, and a few in Hittite, Egyptian, and an undeciphered script called "Cypro-Minoan." However, most were written in the local language (now called Ugaritic), a dialect of the West Semitic Canaanite tongue. These documents in the Ugaritic language help us understand the grammar, vocabulary, word usage, and additional linguistic details of other West Semitic texts, including the Hebrew Bible. Scribes at Ugarit used the Mesopotamian syllabic cuneiform script for almost all of the texts in the non-Ugaritic languages. However, to write their own Ugaritic language they used an alphabetic cuneiform script in which each sign represented a single consonant. Vowels were not written.

The Introduction of the Alphabet

Alphabetic writing was a major improvement on the other scripts used in the Near East as it consisted of a limited number of signs compared to the hundreds of signs needed to master syllabic cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphs. The alphabetic writing in use today around the globe is the direct result of developments that took place in Canaan alongside the innovations at Ugarit. The first true alphabet was probably developed by Canaanite mercenaries or merchants in Egypt just after 2000 BCE. Archaeologists have found an early alphabetic inscription from about 1800 BCE in Egypt's Western Desert between Abydos and Thebes (Himelfarb 2000; Feldman 2000; Chesson et al. 2005: 65–124). However, the Proto-Canaanite signs in this inscription seem to be derived from forms of hieroglyphs used only in the early Middle Kingdom (c. 1980–1880 BCE), indicating the alphabet's earlier origin. By about 1700–1650 BCE, similar alphabetic signs were used on a late Middle Kingdom sphinx and in other inscriptions at the Egyptian mines at Serabit el-Khadim in the Sinai (Healy 1990: 16–17; Goldwasser 2010). So, in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom, Canaanites familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphic writing seem to have come up with the brilliant idea of simplifying this complex system to render their own language. The alphabet eliminated logograms, multi-consonant phonetic signs, and determinatives, and kept only signs representing single consonants. The head of an ox would be used for the consonant at the beginning of the word *'aleph* ("ox"). A sketch plan of a house would be used for the consonant at the beginning of the word *beth* ("house"), and so forth (see [Figure 8.6](#)).

Inscriptions in the Proto-Canaanite alphabet became a bit more frequent in the early New Kingdom era. They continued to be used for inscriptions at mines in Sinai and have been found on Late Bronze Age objects in Palestine. These semipictorial signs developed into the letters of the later Phoenician and Hebrew alphabets (see [Figure 8.6](#)). Furthermore, those later alphabets continued to have their letters in the same sequence as that used for the Proto-Canaanite signs.

Object depicted (Hebrew name)	Egyptian and Proto- Canaanite	Phoenician and early Hebrew	Early Greek	Roman
Ox head ('A'eph)				A
House plan (Beth)				B
Throw stick (Gimel)				G
Water (Mem)				M
Snake (Nun)				N
Eye ('Ayin)				O
Mouth (Pe)				P
Head (Resh)				R

Figure 8.6 The Development of the Alphabet

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

The Ugaritic alphabetic signs also follow the same order as those letters it shares with the Proto-Canaanite alphabet. This shows that these two alphabets were not independently invented. There was once some debate about which version of the alphabet, the Proto-Canaanite or the Ugaritic, came first. However, it is now clear that Proto-Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions precede the earliest attested Ugaritic ones by hundreds of years. Furthermore, the Ugaritic alphabet has three signs that have no equivalents in the Proto-Canaanite list of signs. The fact that these signs are placed together at the end of the Ugaritic alphabet suggests that they were added to an alphabet whose order was already fixed. Therefore, it is virtually certain that the Proto-

Canaanite alphabet was the first one. The Phoenicians later passed a descendant of the Proto-Canaanite alphabet on to the Greeks, and the Greek and later Latin modifications of it lie behind all Western alphabets. Thus, other than the Israelite religion (which also developed in Canaan), the alphabet is the Canaanites' greatest contribution to Western civilization.

Relations with the Aegean Kingdoms

During the New Kingdom, Egypt and the Levant developed particularly strong connections with the Aegean societies of Cyprus, Crete, and Greece. There is considerable evidence for early contacts with Minoan society during the reigns of Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II, the era archaeologists in the Aegean call Late Minoan IB (c. 1500–1450 BCE). The Egyptians called Crete (and its people) Keftiu (which is equivalent to the biblical name Kaphthor and Akkadian Kaptaru). Not only are Minoan objects found at Near Eastern sites, but also Egyptian tomb paintings depict Keftiu in typical Minoan dress bringing such objects to Egypt. We have already mentioned the “Minoan” wall paintings at Avaris during the early part of Thutmose III's reign (c. 1479–1425).

However, disaster overwhelmed Minoan Crete at the end of LMIB, probably during the reign of Thutmose III. All of the palaces were burned, and only Knossos was rebuilt and reoccupied. Some scholars have blamed this destruction on natural causes such as earthquakes or the eruption of Thera. However, most authorities agree that the widespread burning must have been due to some human agency, and that the likely culprits were invaders from mainland Greece.

The Greek-speaking population of the southern part of Greece had been under Minoan cultural influence for centuries. We call these people Mycenaean (after their most important site, Mycenae). They had developed a palace-centered economy like that of Crete, borrowed some aspects of Minoan religion, and copied Minoan artistic motifs although with more of an emphasis on scenes of battles and hunting. Probably each palace had its own king and was an independent entity controlling the territory around it. Though some kings were stronger than others, it is not likely that one ruler controlled all of southern Greece. At the end of the Late Minoan I B Period (around 1450 BCE), a group of Mycenaean warriors probably invaded Crete, destroyed the Minoan palaces, then ruled the island from the rebuilt palace at Knossos. They adapted the Minoan writing system (known as Linear A) to write the early form of Greek that they spoke. Their modified script is called Linear B, and it was used on the mainland as well as in Crete.

Mycenaean adventurers gradually spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean. They conquered and ruled some places, such as Rhodes, or settled peacefully as merchants in other places, such as Miletus (on the western coast of Asia Minor) or Cyprus. They continued the Minoan trade relationships with Near Eastern cultures, and Mycenaean products became common throughout the area. Judging from the pottery vessels archaeologists have uncovered, perfumed oils or salves seem to have been the Near East's favorite import from Mycenaean lands. Egypt referred to Greece as Tanaja (possibly related to a Homeric name for Greeks, Danaoi) and also imported Aegean goods such as cobalt (used as a blue dye in glassmaking) and lead (to make white glass). Amenhotep III had the names of several of his Aegean trading partners (though designated as subjects) inscribed on a statue base in his mortuary temple. The places listed were Amnissos, Knossos, Kydonia, and Phaistos in Crete, Mycenae, Nauplion, and Boeotian Thebes in mainland Greece, and the island of Kythera between the southern Peloponnesus and western Crete (Wilkinson 2013: 244–245; Cline 2014: 44–51). A number of small objects bearing the names of either Amenhotep III or his wife Tiy found at four of the sites mentioned in this Aegean List may testify to these direct court to court exchanges (Cline 2014: 46–50). The close cultural exchange between the two peoples is also easily detectable in Egyptian luxury goods of the Eighteenth Dynasty which often incorporate Aegean imagery.

Akhenaton and the Amarna Revolution (c. 1353–1336 BCE)

Controversies of the Amarna Age

Amenhotep III seems to have groomed his oldest son, Thutmose, to be his successor. However, Thutmose predeceased his father. So the succession passed to a younger son, Amen-hotep IV (c. 1353 to 1336 BCE), better known by the name he later adopted, Akhenaton. He instituted major changes in Egypt, especially in the arts and religion. We call this pharaoh's era the "Amarna Period" because he built a new capital city in an area of Egypt the Arabs called El-Amarna. It is the most written about and controversial period in Egyptian history. There is debate about whether Akhenaton's reign overlapped that of his father, and argument about the nature of his religious ideas. James Breasted claimed that Akhenaton was "the most remarkable of all the Pharaohs, and the

first *individual* in human history” (1909: 356, italics in the original). Some have seen him as a religious visionary who anticipated the monotheism of Judaism by a century or more (e.g., Brier 1998: 61–76; Allen 1999: 44–45, 59; Hornung 1999: 52–60, 87–104). Several scholars also have argued that Akhenaton’s monotheism influenced that of Moses. On the other hand, one scholar has noted that Akhenaton’s elimination of mythology—his emphasis on the sun as a natural force rather than a personal one—might better be designated atheism than monotheism (Redford 1984: 233–234). Still others have claimed that Akhenaton had a disease that left him mentally impaired or deranged (e.g., Giles 1970). These individuals usually credit the many changes introduced during his reign to his mother or wife ruling behind the scenes.

A major reason for the wide disparity of views about this historical period is that later Egyptians regarded its revolutionary changes as heresies. They smashed monuments and objects associated with the hated era. They erased the names of Akhenaton and his immediate successors from inscriptions and eliminated them from king lists, suppressing almost all memory of the period. Even though modern archaeology has been able to rescue some of the buildings, art, and inscriptions from this time, those remnants are usually in very fragmentary condition. Thus, most interpretations of the evidence are tenuous.

Debating the Evidence: Did Akhenaton Have a Coregency with His Father?

Over the years, many scholars have proposed a period of joint rule between Amenhotep IV/Akhenaton and his father, Amenhotep III. This view stemmed primarily from the fact that Tutankhamun (the famous “King Tut”), Akhenaton’s successor, called Amenhotep III his father in several inscriptions. Since Tutankhamun was only about nine or ten years old when he became king and Akhenaton reigned seventeen years, there would have to have been at least seven years’ overlap in the reigns of Amenhotep III and Akhenaton. The existence of such a long coregency naturally would affect the interpretation of Akhenaton’s religious revolution. However, the Egyptian word for “father” could also mean “ancestor.” And when the inscriptions were made, Tutankhamun may have wished to stress his relationship to Amenhotep III and minimize his connections with Akhenaton.

Other evidence cited for a coregency comes from tomb reliefs and paintings that are interpreted as showing the two kings, both depicted as pharaohs, at the same time. However, as these reliefs are open to art historical

interpretation, the arguments based on this material are not very convincing (Redford 1967: 88–169). For an overview of the available evidence on the “coregency conundrum,” see Dodson 2014: 74–76).

In 2012 CE, the issue seemed to have been solved when Zahi Hawass, then head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, and a group of Egyptian scientists published the results of DNA tests performed on Tutankhamun’s mummy and ten other royal mummies. Hawass and his team reported that the tests showed that Amenhotep III *was* Tutankhamun’s grandfather, not his father. Akhenaton was judged to be Tutankhamun’s father as most Egyptologists had thought (Hawass et al. 2010; Hawass 2013: 167; Hawass and Saleem 2016: 122–123). Thus, these tests seemed to remove the main evidence that necessitated a long coregency between Amenhotep III and Akhenaton. Unfortunately, though, the issue is not that simple. Several scholars have attacked both the methodology and the interpretation of the Egyptian team’s DNA studies and some recent research has raised doubts about the reliability of DNA tests even for identifying currently living individuals (Tyldesley 2012: 163–173; Marchant 2013: 197–211; Dodson 2014: 163–167; Eaton-Krauss 2016: 6–11). Thus, the question of Tutankhamun’s parentage remains open.

In 2014, news was announced that there was new evidence to prove a coregency of Akhenaton with Amenhotep III of at least eight years.⁴ Spanish and Egyptian archaeologists discovered two columns in the tomb of a vizier of Amenhotep III bearing the cartouches of Amenhotep and a short distance away two others with the cartouches of Amenhotep IV (before he changed his name to Akhenaton). They argue that the inscriptions were made at the time of Amenhotep III’s first *heb-sed* (Jubilee Festival) in his thirtieth regnal year and that work on the tomb ceased soon afterward. Thus, the two sets of inscriptions supposedly show that Akhenaton was co-ruler with his father from at least year thirty until Amenhotep III’s death in or soon after his thirty-eighth regnal year. However, the royal cartouches are not side by side in a single inscription and they could have been made at different times. In addition, it is not certain when the vizier died. It’s possible he started his tomb during the reign of Amenhotep III and was still working on it into the subsequent reign of Akhenaton (Dodson 2014: 34).

Several other lines of evidence work against the coregency hypothesis. Tushratta, ruler of Mitanni, wrote a letter to Akhenaton soon after Amenhotep III’s death. In this letter, Tushratta says he was devastated when he learned that Amenhotep III had died, but his optimism revived when he learned that Amenhotep IV was now king in his father’s place (Moran 1992: 94). This statement suggests that Akhenaton became king only after the death of his father. Moreover, Tushratta expresses hope for continued good relations with Egypt and suggests that Akhenaton ask his mother, Queen Tiy, about the

former friendly relationship between the two nations (Moran 1992: 92, 94). It is very unlikely that Tushratta would have written such a thing to a person who had been on the throne as coregent with his father (even as minor partner) for eight years or more.

Furthermore, Akhenaton's attack on the old Egyptian religion seems to have begun around his sixth year on the throne. At about that time, revenues from Amun's temples were diverted to the Aton temples in Akhenaton's new city (see the next section). Then, probably in or before Akhenaton's ninth regnal year, Amun's name began to be hacked off monuments, and even removed from the cartouches of Amenhotep III's name. This would not have happened until after Amenhotep III's death, because until he died, Amenhotep III continued to worship Amun. Furthermore, through at least Amenhotep III's thirty-seventh year, work continued on his temple for Amun at Luxor and there was no attack on the references to Amun in Amenhotep III's tomb. So Amenhotep III probably was dead before Akhenaton's sixth year. Consequently, most Egyptologists have rejected the idea of a coregency between Akhenaton and Amenhotep III, although a *very* brief coregency remains possible and the discoveries of 2014 have reopened the issue.

The Beginning of Amenhotep IV's Reign

Amenhotep IV probably became pharaoh only when his father died (c. 1353 BCE). The woman he chose as his Chief Wife was probably his first cousin. She seems to have been the daughter of Ay, probably a brother of Queen Tiye. Her name was Nefertiti ("The Beautiful Woman Has Come"), and except for Cleopatra, she is the best known of all ancient Egyptian queens ([Figure 8.7](#)).



Figure 8.7 A Bust of Nefertiti

This plaster bust was found in a sculptor's workshop in Amarna. The inlay for the left eye is missing.

© Art Resource of New York.



Figure 8.8 Statue of Akhenaton from the Aton Temple, Thebes

This colossal statue is made of sandstone and shows the new Amarna Style.
© Scala/Art Resource, New York.

Like his grandfather and even more so his father, Amenhotep IV emphasized the worship of the Aton (the Solar Orb), erecting two temples to this god in Thebes. However, the new temples' form and decoration were quite different from that of most Egyptian temples. Like his father's mortuary temple, Amenhotep IV's temples were basically open courts into which the sun could

shine, somewhat like the sun temples of the Old Kingdom. Within the main temple, Amenhotep IV erected statues of himself unlike any seen in Egypt before (see [Figure 8.8](#)). Artists had depicted previous pharaohs as perfectly proportioned, godlike rulers. But these early statues of Amenhotep IV show a thin-faced king with fleshy lips and an oversized jaw. He also has a long skinny neck, narrow sloping shoulders, effeminate breasts, protruding abdomen, fleshy hips and thighs, and spindly lower legs. The temples' decoration also emphasized the role of the king's Chief Wife. In some reliefs, Nefertiti was shown dutifully standing behind the king as he made offerings to Aton. But in others, she was shown making offerings to the Solar Orb by herself. This was something only pharaohs had been shown doing in the past. Thus, like Queen Tiy, she was being presented as almost the equal of her divine husband.

The king's physique as portrayed in the Aton temple is so abnormal that several scholars believe that he suffered from some terrible disease.⁵ Some of the diseases that have been suggested, though, would have left Akhenaton mentally impaired. If he had one of these diseases, someone else must have actually been responsible for "Akhenaton's" religious reforms. In 2010 Zahi Hawass and his team of Egyptian scientists claimed that they had identified Akhenaton's mummy through DNA tests and computerized tomography (CT) scans. They announced that they did not find evidence of any disfiguring disease or of the bodily distortions depicted in Amarna art. As we have seen, though, almost immediately, many other scientists disputed the research and interpretations of this team. Despite this controversy, it is clear that later statues of the king do not emphasize his deformities as much as the early ones do. In addition, the entire family is depicted this way, so it is more likely that this is a stylistic convention probably instituted as a result of Akhenaton's theology than a realistic portrait of deformities. The new style may have arisen from Akhenaton's identification with the Aton, the source of all life, who thus combined within himself both male and female elements (Aldred 1988: 235–236; Hawass 2013: 43; Hawass and Saleem 2016: 124–125).

Akhenaton's Religious Reformation

For the first few years of his reign, Amenhotep IV made only mild breaks with the past. He completed the gateway to Amun's temple at Karnak that his father had begun and erected a new temple to Amun-Re in Nubia. Then, on the third anniversary of his accession, he celebrated a joint *heb-sed* or Jubilee Festival with the Aton. Jubilees were usually held only after a pharaoh had

been on the throne for thirty years. The timing was not the only unusual aspect of this Jubilee, for Akhenaton had the Aton's name written in two cartouches like the name of a king and had the sun globe depicted wearing an uraeus cobra like that worn by every pharaoh.⁶

In his fourth year of rule, the king began building a new city for his favorite god, Aton. He chose a location about halfway between Memphis and Thebes, at present-day El-Amarna. He named this city Akhetaton, usually translated as "Horizon of the Aton (the Sun Disk)." However, a better rendering is "The Place Where the Solar Orb is Transformed." A year later, he changed his personal name from Amenhotep ("Amun is Content") to Akhenaton ("The Transfigured Spirit of the Solar Orb," or less likely, "He Who is Effective for [or Serviceable to] the Solar Orb"). The following year (his sixth year of reign) he moved his family and the court to the new capital. There they could devote themselves to the worship of the Aton.

Sometime after moving from Thebes, probably between his sixth and ninth regnal years, Akhenaton diverted revenues of the temples of Amun and those of some of the major traditional Egyptian gods to temples for the Aton. He especially attacked the main deities of Thebes: Amun, his consort Mut and their son Khons. His conception of the Aton grew more and more abstract. About his eighth or ninth year, he changed the official name of the Aton to remove from it hieroglyphs symbolizing the sun as a falcon. At the same time, words like *ma'at* ("truth; order") and *mut* ("mother") began to be spelled out phonetically instead of being expressed logographically by hieroglyphs that could also be read as divine names. Even the plural word for "gods" was erased from some inscriptions. Also about this time, the king's agents began hacking the names of the proscribed deities off monuments and destroying their sacred images. Akhenaton especially hated the name of Amun, which he ordered erased wherever it occurred, even in the name of his father, Amenhotep III.

At Akhetaton, the royal family worshipped the Aton as the sole god, the creator of all things (see [Document 8.3](#)). Many have seen this new religion as a monotheistic faith on the order of later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, those who hold such ideas usually neglect an important aspect of the Amarna religion—the position of the royal family. Akhenaton's new religion continued a trend emphasizing the divinity of the monarch begun during earlier reigns. Both Hatshepsut and Amenhotep III claimed to be the direct offspring of Amun. Like his father, Akhenaton asserted his divinity as the bodily offspring and earthly embodiment of the sun god, Aton. His capital city was Akhetaton, usually rendered "the Horizon of the Aton." However, as we have seen, for Egyptians, *akhet* ("horizon") was not just the place where the sky seems to meet the earth. It was the home of light, and the place where a dead person was changed into an *akh* ("a glorified spirit") and where the sun

was transformed daily. So the meaning of Akhetaton was “the place where the Aton is transfigured into a glorified being.” And the king’s name, Akhenaton, proclaimed that *he* was the transfigured earthly form of the Solar Orb—“the *akh* (glorified spirit) of the Aton.”⁷ The Aton hymn also makes it clear that the god-king was the intermediary between humans and the Aton: “No one knows you [Aton] except your son Neferkheperure Waenre [Akhenaton]” (see [Document 8.3](#)). Finally, it is important to note that in addition to the large temples to the Aton at Akhetaton, there were several small public temples or shrines where Akhenaton himself was worshipped and probably also Nefertiti (Kemp 2012: 117–118).

Document 8.3 The Hymn to the Aton

This great Hymn to the Aton was found inscribed on a wall in the tomb of Ay, a high official under Akhenaton who was probably Nefertiti’s father and who later became pharaoh. Variations of it also were found in other tombs at El-Amarna. The Aton Hymn, presumably composed by Akhenaton himself, has often been compared to Psalm 104. Those who consider Akhenaton’s religion monotheistic usually cite it, since it hails the Aton as “sole god” and the source of all life. (This translation by W. Stiebing is based on those by Gardiner 1961: 224–227; J. Wilson 1955; Lichtheim 1976: 96–100; Murnane 1995: 113–116; Tyldesley 1998: 86–87; Allen 1999: 48).

Your beauty is apparent as you rise from the *akhet* [the place of transformation],
O living Aton, the source of life!
When you rise in the east,
You fill every land with your beauty.
You are beautiful and great, gleaming high above every land;
Your rays shine upon all of the lands you have created...
When you set in the west,
The land is dark, like the darkness of death...
Darkness covers the earth, and all is still,
For he who created them is resting in the *akhet*.
At daybreak, when you rise from the *akhet*, shining as the Solar Orb by day,
You pour forth your rays, driving away the darkness,
and the Two Lands engage in festal celebration!...
How manifold are your works,
But they are unperceived by humans.
O sole god, like whom there is no other,
You created the world according to your plan—
You, and you alone,
(Made) all people, domestic animals and wild creatures...
You assign every person a place,

And you supply their necessities.
Everyone is fed, and the length of each lifetime allotted....
No one knows you except your son
Neferkheperure Waenre [Akhenaton]
To whom you have revealed your plans and your power....

Akhenaton's religion did not just eliminate devotion to Amun and other major deities. Probably for most Egyptians, this revolution hit closest to home when it tried to end veneration of household deities and suppress traditional beliefs about the afterlife. People no longer were supposed to worship Osiris or perform the old burial rites (though they seem to have maintained the time-honored beliefs and to have continued the traditional rites at places other than Akhetaton). At Akhetaton, individuals could attain the afterlife only as a gracious gift of the divine king. Even the images covering the walls of Amarna's private tombs and on altars and shrines in private houses depict the activities of Akhenaton, Nefertiti, and other members of the royal family rather than those of the owners, as in the past. All attention is focused on the god-king through whom the Aton's blessings must be mediated. Relief carvings of the royal couple playing with their daughters likely served as replacements for images of the old forbidden fertility deities. The divine couple's love and fecundity became the assurance of fertility and prosperity for individuals and for the land itself. There was now a new divine triad in place of the old creator god Atum, his son Shu, and Shu's sister/consort Tefnut. The new trinity consisted of Aton (the Creator), Akhenaton (Aton's son and earthly image), and Nefertiti (Akhenaton's female counterpart and soul mate).

Many have argued that these religious changes may have been intended, in part, to reduce the power of the priesthood of Amun. He seems to have been attempting to revive the early Old Kingdom conception of the king as the primary national deity and continuing his father's trends of emphasizing the king's divinity and the worship of the sun god. Once again pharaoh—not Amun or Ptah or even Re or Aton—would be the god who was responsible for everything that happened within Egypt. And once again, like Old Kingdom rulers, only Akhenaton would have a true afterlife by becoming one with Aton. Others would have only a limited existence in and around their tombs and the Aton temples, praising the sun's light and warmth during the day, magically consuming some of the food offerings made in the Aton temples, and sleeping in their tombs during the night. Furthermore, even that meager future shadow life would exist only if the king willed it.

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that Akhenaton's religion failed to take root in the hearts of most Egyptians. It took away the local and household gods from whom ordinary people could ask favors or to whom they could turn

for solace. For these ever-present divinities, it substituted a distant impersonal Solar Orb whose grace had to be mediated by an almost as distant pharaoh. Moreover, it stressed that life after death was a gift from the king. Thus, it denied an afterlife to anyone who did not know the pharaoh personally. Only those with direct and constant access to the royal family could have drawn much comfort from such a religion.

Although many have seen Akhenaton as the inspiration for Mosaic monotheism, the many differences in detail, as well as in basic concepts, between Akhenaton's religion and that of early Israel (see [Chapter 13](#)) make it highly unlikely that there could have been a direct relationship between the two (Fagan 2015). There is a definite similarity between parts of the Aton Hymn and Psalm 104. But phrases used in the Aton Hymn had been applied to other Egyptian gods before Akhenaton's reign and were used again after his death. It was probably some of those later hymns, perhaps mediated by Canaanite sources, which influenced the psalmist long after the end of the Amarna Age.

Debating the Evidence: The Revolution's Denouement

Our knowledge of the last five years of Akhenaton's reign is even more confused and uncertain than it is for the rest of the Amarna Period. That there was a coregency during Akhenaton's last one to three years on the throne is almost certain. A stele depicts Akhenaton seated beside a second king, but with a loving pose. Unfortunately, the names of the two kings had not yet been added when work on it ceased. Other inscriptions provide the names of *two* kings who seem to have been coregents with Akhenaton (Murnane 1995: 205–210). One king is named Ankhkheperure Smenkhkare (“Kheperure [a shortened form of Akhenaton's praenomen] Lives,” “Vigorous is the Ka of Re”). The other is designated Ankhkheperure Neferneferuaton (“Kheperure Lives,” “Beautiful [or Perfect] Indeed is the Beauty [or Perfection] of the Aton”). It was once widely assumed that Ankhkheperure Smenkhkare and Ankhkheperure Neferneferuaton were the same person—that for some reason Smenkhkare, a possible son or younger brother of Akhenaton, had changed his name to Neferneferuaton during his reign. However, there are several lines of evidence that Neferneferuaton was a woman, and probably Nefertiti.

For one thing, the name “Neferneferuaton” had previously been part of Nefertiti's name. King Neferneferuaton also used Nefertiti's epithet “Beloved of Waenre (Akhenaton)” following her name, sometimes with a feminine ending. Furthermore, partially erased inscriptions of Neferneferuaton inside

coffin-shaped canopic containers reused for Tutankhamun contained the epithet “effective for her husband.” These inscriptions prove that Neferneferuaton was a woman (and the king’s wife) (Gabolde 1998: 153–157; Dodson and Hilton 2004: 285, note 111; Dodson 2009c: 36). While, none of these arguments are conclusive, some Egyptologists have reasoned that King Neferneferuaton was actually Nefertiti after Akhenaton made her his coregent in the latter part of his reign (Harris 1973, 1974; Samson 1977, 1978; Reeves 2001: 162–173). This would explain why Nefertiti disappeared from most Amarna records after about the thirteenth year of the king.⁸

Even so, there are good reasons to doubt Nefertiti’s status as a ruling pharaoh. A new inscription found in 2012 CE names Nefertiti as the King’s Chief Wife in Akhenaton’s sixteenth regnal year (Perre 2013, 2014; Dodson 2014: 133). Surely she would have been referred to with the titles of the king had she been coregent at that time. She is also never given pharaonic titles in later inscriptions describing her children’s parentage. Likewise, a fragmentary *shabti* made for Nefertiti and supposedly found near the royal tomb at Amarna also calls her Chief Wife, suggesting that she had no other titles at the time of her death (Aldred 1988: 229–230; Tyldesley 1998: 151, 176; 2006: 132–134). These issues have led to the suggestion that Neferneferuaton was actually Meritaton, Nefertiti and Akhenaton’s daughter and the wife of Smenkhkare (e.g., Dodson and Hilton 2004: 143; Tyldesley 2012: 188, 204). This was the view held in the second edition of this book. However, Aidan Dodson has noted that a box fragment from the tomb of Tutankhamun contained the names of Akhenaton, Neferneferuaton, and Meritaton as separate individuals, presumably eliminating the possibility that Meritaton was also Neferneferuaton (Dodson 2009a: 29, 32; 2009c: 34, 37).

Assuming that either Nefertiti or Meritaton reigned as Neferneferuaton, there is still the issue of fitting Ankhkheperure Smenkhkare into the available evidence. An inscription with cartouches of both Smenkhkare and Akhenaton shows that they too, ruled together. Although some scholars argue that Neferneferuaton is also Smenkhkare, this position is difficult to maintain. We know that Pharaoh Neferneferuaton was on the throne (with that name) into her third regnal year and was a coregent with Akhenaton for at least a time. So, if Nefertiti was Pharaoh Neferneferuaton, she was using that name at least a year or two after Akhenaton’s death. Why would Nefertiti adopt the name Smenkhkare for a short time only to revert to her previous name Neferneferuaton shortly before the death of her husband? Additionally, even though it is no smoking gun given the history of Hatshepsut’s imagery, the one and only image of Smenkhkare is of a *male* king holding the hand of his Chief Wife, Meritaton.

A further consideration in this debate comes from the controversy

surrounding an Amarna Period mummy excavated in 1907 from tomb KV55. The mummy had been mistreated in antiquity and the name on the king's coffin had been cut out. Nonetheless, magic bricks inscribed with the name of Akhenaton led the Egyptologist Arthur Weigall to conclude that this was the mummy of the "heretic king" Akhenaton. The problem was that studies of the body carried out over the years by anatomists and physical anthropologists concluded that the king in KV55 was only about eighteen to twenty-five years old at death (Brier 1998: 163–164; Reeves 2001: 80–84; Filer 2002; Duhig 2010; Strouhal 2010). That was too young to be Akhenaton, who reigned for seventeen years and had fathered three daughters before he came to the throne. So, the mummy in KV55 was usually identified as that of Smenkhkare, the only other royal male of the Amarna Period without a mummy.

However, recent CT scans of this mummy conducted as part of the study to determine Tutankhamun's parentage may have changed the situation dramatically. It is claimed that they show that the KV55 king had age-related degeneration of the spine and osteoarthritis, indicating that he was probably between thirty-five and forty-five years old. Moreover, DNA tests of the mummy supposedly indicate that this king was the father of Tutankhamun and a son of Amenhotep III and Tiye. Thus, the body in KV55 probably would be that of Akhenaton as Weigall suggested long ago (Hawass et al. 2010; Hawass and Saleem 2016: 84–86). However, as we have noted, for several reasons other scientists have disputed the supposed results of the CT scans and DNA tests. Based on earlier anatomists' estimates of the age of the person in KV55, many continue to believe that this individual must be Smenkhkare (e.g., Dodson 2014: 166). In fact, the CT scan showed that the individual had an upper third molar tooth (popularly known as a wisdom tooth) that had not yet erupted and a lower wisdom tooth that was only partially erupted (Hawass and Saleem 2016: 87). This evidence suggests an age at death younger than 35–45. It is important to note, though, that some scholars question the evidence on which *any* dates for age at death of a corpse from the past can be based (Dodson 2009b; Eaton-Krauss 2016: 9). Even if one accepts the DNA results, the king in KV55 could still be Smenkhkare, assuming he is a full brother of Akhenaton. If so, Smenkhkare, rather than Akhenaton, would have been Tutankhamun's father, and obviously he cannot be identified with the female king Neferneferuaton.

As it stands most scholars acknowledge Akhenaton's coregencies with both Smenkhkare and Neferneferuaton (either Nefertiti or Meritaton). The question is who preceded whom? At present, the following explanation seems most likely. Near the end of his reign, Akhenaton named Smenkhkare (probably his son or younger brother) as his coregent with Meritaton as Smenkhkare's Great Wife. However, the new co-ruler died soon after ascending to the throne.

Prince Tutankhaton, son of either Akhenaton or Smenkhkare, was too young to rule, so Akhenaton appointed a female coregent (probably Nefertiti) who took the name Ankhkheperure Neferneferuaton. Less than a year later, Akhenaton died after seventeen years on the throne. Probably shortly after his death, Neferneferuaton decided to make her peace with the old religion and reopen the temples of Amun. A Theban tomb graffito makes it certain that by the third year of Ankhkheperure Neferneferuaton, Amun's worship had resumed at Thebes (Murnane 1995: 207–208). Moreover, the funerary equipment she had made for herself shows that traditional funerary beliefs had been restored. But the third year of Neferneferuaton's rule was likely her last. Whether or not she died of natural causes is also unknown. However, Neferneferuaton was almost certainly denied a royal burial since objects intended for her burial (including the miniature coffins intended to hold her viscera) were later modified and used in that of Tutankhamun (e.g., Reeves 1990: 75, 114, 122, 151, 169, 190, 193; Tyldesley 2012: 122–124).

The End of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1335–1292 BCE)

Tutankhamun and the Restoration of Amun

The throne now passed to Tutankhaton, popularly known today as “King Tut” (c. 1335–1326 BCE). As we have noted, this 9- or 10-year-old pharaoh was almost certainly the son of either Akhenaton or Smenkhkare. A damaged inscription on a stone found at Hermopolis (but originally from Akhetaton) refers to Tutankhaton as “the bodily son of the king.” Unfortunately, though, the king in question is not named. Earlier x-ray studies and blood tests had revealed that there was a close genetic relationship between Tut and the person in KV55. Now, the recent DNA studies of Eighteenth Dynasty royal mummies mentioned earlier supposedly show that Tutankhaton was the son of the king buried in KV55 and an unidentified woman whose body was found in a cache of several royal mummies in Amenhotep II's tomb (KV35). The DNA evidence was interpreted as showing that Tut's mother was a daughter of Amenhotep III and Tiye, and thus a full sister of Tut's father, the king in KV55 (Hawass 2013: 167; Hawass and Saleem 2016: 80–86). It was claimed that Nefertiti could not have been Tut's mother, for nowhere is she designated a “daughter of the king.” However, it has been noted that if the DNA data is

reliable, the KV35 mummy could be “genetically either the sister or paternal *and* maternal first cousin of Tutankhamun’s father” (Dodson 2014: 88). That second scenario possibly could be true for Nefertiti.

The child-king took as his Chief Wife his 12- to 13-year-old sister, half-sister, or first cousin, Ankhesenpaaton. Of course, Tutankhaton was too young to actually rule the country. The government was in the hands of Ay, probably Nefertiti’s father and Ankhesenpaaton’s grandfather. Ay had been Master of the Horse (commander of chariot forces) under Akhenaton, and now served as regent for Tutankhaton.

Under Ay’s guidance, Tutankhaton continued Neferneferuaton’s policy of reconciliation with the old faith, but for a couple of years the new pharaoh and his court remained at Akhetaton. It was not enough, though, for the royal family merely to acquiesce to the people’s worship of the old gods. A more positive step was needed to bridge the chasm that Akhenaton’s rule had created between the king and his subjects. So the young pharaoh and his queen changed their names to Tutankhamun and Ankhesenamun respectively. They abandoned Akhetaton and made Memphis the administrative capital and Thebes the primary religious center once more. Without the pharaoh and royal court to sustain it, Akhenaton’s city quickly became little more than a ghost town.

Ay also had Tutankhamun institute a widespread building program to repair those temples damaged by Akhenaton. New priests and prophets from the upper classes were appointed. Tut also gave the refurbished temples many of the singers, dancers, and slaves who had been attached to the palace or were the king’s own property. The temples of local gods once more received revenues that Akhenaton had diverted to the temples of Aton or to the royal treasury. The royal administration made an attempt to make everything seem to be the way it had been before the Amarna Revolution.

While the old religion was reinstated and Amun resumed his position of primacy in the pantheon, the Aton continued to be worshipped. Akhenaton’s Aton temples remained open, and objects displaying the image or name of the Aton continued to be used. But now the Aton was once again only one god among many, and he was no longer the pharaoh’s favorite. Though he emphasized his descent from Amenhotep III, Tutankhamun did not totally abandon his real father’s memory. At some point after he left Akhetaton, Tut seems to have had the bodies of his father (Akhenaton or Smenkhkare) and his grandmother Tiy removed from their tombs at Akhetaton and secretly reburied in a small tomb (KV55) in the Valley of the Kings across the river from Thebes. The coffin and canopic jars used for the king reburied in KV55 had originally been made for a female member of the royal family (probably Kiya). This fact may indicate that either the king in KV55 had not reigned long

enough to have burial equipment of his own (suggesting that the body is that of Smenkhkare) or that the coffin and equipment with which that ruler had originally been buried had been damaged or stolen before the reburial took place (which would likely be true if the body is that of Akhenaton).

Like the traditional religion, the Egyptian Empire also had to be restored. Akhenaton was not a pacifist as sometimes claimed. His army had conducted a military campaign in Nubia, and Egyptian garrisons had remained in Canaan. Also, like previous pharaohs, he had himself depicted killing foreign prisoners kneeling before him. So, his religious beliefs would not have precluded his sending out troops to crush rebellion. Nevertheless, as the Amarna Letters indicate, there had been some internecine fighting among Egypt's Asiatic vassals during his reign, and he does not seem to have taken any action. More troubling, though, had been the Hittite conquest of Qadesh and other cities in northern Syria towards the end of Akhenaton's life. Also, revolts had broken out in Nubia once again. So, early in Tutankhamun's reign, his generals seem to have begun a series of military campaigns to reestablish Egyptian power. Then, when he reached adulthood (around age sixteen in ancient Egypt), Tut may have personally led his troops into battle. Recent study of a number of stone blocks originally from a temple in Thebes has revealed narrative war scenes showing Tutankhamun in a chariot at the head of his army in Syria and receiving prisoners after his fleet has sailed up the Nile with a Syrian prisoner in a cage hanging from the king's barge (Johnson 2009–2010, 2010; Marchant 2013: 213–214; Eaton-Krauss 2016: 100–101). A previously known box from Tut's tomb had shown him in a chariot defeating Nubians and Asiatics, but most scholars had assumed that these were traditional ritual representations, not to be taken literally. The new finds, though, have opened that assumption to question (see the arguments in the following "Debating the Evidence" section).

Debating the Evidence: The Death of Tutankhamun

Tutankhamun was only about eighteen or nineteen years old when he died. After studying earlier x-rays, a pathologist noted what he regarded as evidence of a partially healed hematoma at the base of Tut's skull, possibly caused by a blow from a blunt object. There was also a fragment of bone noted inside the skull. The location of the supposed injury made it unlikely that it was accidental, so some scholars have argued that he was murdered (Brier 1998: 165–174). However, virtually all experts now agree that there is no evidence of a skull fracture or hematoma on the earlier x-rays or the recent CT scans of

the mummy. The “abnormality” at the base the skull observed by the pathologist was actually due to the position of the skull when the earlier x-ray was made and the piece of bone within the skull resulted from postmortem handling of Tut’s body.

On the other hand, there is evidence that the king suffered a fractured left thigh bone just above the knee and that it may have occurred shortly before he died. On his left side, Tut’s ribs and pelvis were also broken, though it is difficult to determine whether the breaks occurred before or after death. Thus, some scholars have speculated that Tutankhamun died from injuries sustained from a fall from his chariot while in battle or hunting. Recently, though, the scholars who conducted the studies of Tutankhamun’s mummy have claimed that he was frail and had a deformed left foot with painful bone necrosis, causing him to walk with a limp and with the aid of a walking stick. They note that there were 130 walking sticks and staffs in his tomb, some meant solely for rituals, but many ordinary ones showing signs of use. If these scholars are correct, Tut probably would not have been leading his armies or hunting from a chariot. They argue that Tut also suffered from repeated bouts of malaria that may have contributed to his early death. They speculate that a fall badly fractured his leg and probably that led to blood poisoning or some other infection that killed him (Hawass 2013: 159; Hawass and Saleem 2016: 96–97, 103).

However, like the other conclusions arising from the recent CT scans and DNA tests, the claims about his frail condition have been disputed. The leg fracture and breaks in other bones might have been caused during mummification or by archaeologists handling the body after its discovery.⁹ The foot “deformity” could have been due to the way it was bound by the priests who mummified the body (Shaer 2014: 80). Also, fluids used during the mummification might have produced the erosion of the bone interpreted as necrosis. For what it’s worth, in the late 1960s an Egyptian guide who claims to have been present when Howard Carter was examining the mummy said that Carter used a blowtorch on Tut’s toes to melt the resin covering them (Marchant 2013: 234). Moreover, while much is made of the walking sticks in Tut’s tomb, such staffs were symbols of high office in ancient Egypt and would have been used whether or not the king had a foot problem. It should be noted that the tomb also contained six chariots that seem to have been used, almost fifty bows, many arrows, thirty throwing sticks and many other weapons for use in battle and hunting. Finally, Tut’s leather sandals do not display different patterns of wear for the left and right feet, as one would expect if Tutankhamun walked with a severe limp and had to lean on a walking stick (Marchant 2013: 233–235).

Another important fact about Tutankhamun’s mummy is that it is missing

its heart, its sternum and part of its chest wall. Some of the ribs are broken (as noted earlier), but others have been cut through. Zahi Hawass notes that Derry, the anatomist who first examined Tut's mummy, made no reference to this damage to its chest. Hawass believes it occurred either during its unwrapping in 1925 or when the mummy was robbed of some jewelry sometime between 1926 and 1967. He also notes that some broken rib and clavicle pieces were found in the sand in the bottom of the box in which Carter placed the mummy (Hawass 2013: 157).¹⁰ However, the cut ends of some of the ribs show no evidence of splintering. Some splintering would be expected if the cuts were made in modern times when the bones had become very brittle. So, some argue that much of the damage to Tut's chest most likely happened in antiquity, soon after his death. Perhaps the priests who mummified the body cut some of Tutankhamun's ribs and removed his sternum because some ribs were broken and the chest area was already severely damaged. Another anomaly is that Tut's diaphragm is intact. Usually, embalmers cut through it to reach the lungs, but perhaps in Tut's case they didn't have to do so because these organs could be reached through his already opened chest.

The unusually large amount of unguents poured over the body suggests to some that the body may already have begun to putrefy before mummification began. Could Tutankhamun have received a massive chest injury that badly damaged his heart when he was many days distant from Memphis or Thebes, perhaps while hunting or in battle (Tyldesley 2012: 160–161)? W. Benson Harer has argued that a hippopotamus probably killed Tutankhamun by crushing his chest during a hunt, but Harer admits that alternatively Tut might have received injuries to his chest and heart in battle (Harer 2006; Marchant 2013: 215–221). More recently, Egyptologist Chris Naunton, Director of the Egypt Exploration Society, and British forensic experts have noted that the mummy's injuries resemble those of victims of modern automobile crashes. After conducting computer simulations, they concluded that Tut was probably run over by a chariot while he was on his knees (Owen 2013).¹¹ So, possibly the young pharaoh who had reestablished Egypt's traditional religion lost his life trying to preserve its empire as well. However, it is worthwhile to note that the various theories are all just speculations (Rühli and Ikram 2014). Despite the many tests and studies, we are still not certain whether Tut was a frail crippled young man or a strong young warrior, and we still can't be sure how he died.

The Reigns of Ay and Horemheb (c. 1325–1292 BCE)

Tutankhamun and Ankhesenamun probably had two stillborn daughters, but

no living heir. Tutankhamun was the last direct male descendant of the line of pharaohs that had ruled Egypt since the expulsion of the Hyksos some 215 years earlier. Ay seems to have considered himself Tutankhamun's rightful successor and he seems to have planned to marry his granddaughter Ankhesenamun to strengthen his claim to the throne. It is also possible that various people were pressuring the queen to marry one of her vigorous and competent high officials such as the general Horemheb to make him king. Ankhesenamun, though, had other ideas. In the days after Tutankhamun's death, she seems to have written to the Hittite king Suppiluliuma who was campaigning in Syria at the time:¹²

My husband died and I have no son. People say you have many sons. If you were to send me one of your sons, he might become my husband. I am loath to take a servant of mine and make him my husband.

(Goetze 1955: 319)

Suppiluliuma could not believe this offer was genuine. So he sent his chamberlain to Egypt to secure reliable information. When the Hittite king discovered that Ankhesenamun was in earnest, he complied with her request. However, it was too late. Someone, probably Ay or Horemheb, had learned of the plan. The Hittite prince Zannanza died or was murdered during his journey to Egypt or soon after his arrival, prompting war between the two powers. Ay assumed the throne and probably married Ankhesenamun. He officiated at the burial rites as the body of Tutankhamun was laid to rest in the Valley of the Kings in a small, hastily decorated tomb probably not originally intended for a king.¹³ Ay also had several objects that had been made for the burial of Neferneferuaton (probably Nefertiti) modified and used for Tutankhamun instead.

Howard Carter's discovery of this tomb in 1922 CE caused a sensation. Tomb robbers had entered it on two different occasions in antiquity. However, in both instances, the robberies were discovered quickly and the tomb resealed. The thieves made off with some jewelry and other small objects, but thousands of burial gifts remained. Among them was a throne, chariots, shrines, furniture, linens, sandals, gloves, musical instruments, weapons, games, baskets of fruit, and containers full of food—everything the king might need in his afterlife. Fortunately, the robbers barely penetrated the door into the burial chamber. There the pharaoh's mummy reposed in three nested coffins within a quartzite sarcophagus surrounded by four shrines. The innermost coffin (see [Figure 8.9](#)) was solid 22-karat gold and weighed almost 250 pounds! Though the objects in the tomb had been hastily assembled and were not all of the best quality, they still astound visitors to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. They are a unique testimony to the wealth and glory of pharaonic Egypt. We can only

wonder what the burial goods of great pharaohs such as Thutmose III or Ramesses II must have been like.

Ay continued implementing the policies of restoration and reconciliation begun by Neferneferuaton and ongoing throughout Tutankhamun's reign. But he was already an old man when he became pharaoh, and he had no sons. He died after a brief reign of only five or six years (c. 1325–1320 BCE), leaving Egypt's throne to General Horemheb, who may also have been his coregent during the last months of his life.



Figure 8.9 The Solid Gold Inner Coffin of Tutankhamun

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Horemheb (c. 1320 to 1292 BCE) legitimized his rule by marrying Ay's daughter and Nefertiti's sister, Mutnedjmet. Perhaps to win popular support and to strengthen his somewhat tenuous hold on the throne, the new king began a campaign of vengeance against the Aton. He destroyed the Aton temples and obliterated inscriptions mentioning Aton or Akhenaton. Horemheb's agents probably even entered KV55 (the burial place of Akhenaton or Smenkhkare) and the tomb of Ay, hacking out images and names of the Aton and the heretical kings. They also probably removed the body of Queen Tiye from KV55 and reburied her in her husband Amenhotep III's tomb. Horemheb dated his reign from the death of Amenhotep III, eliminating all

official references to the Amarna pharaohs. On the rare occasions when a text had to mention Akhenaton, it referred to him simply as “the enemy from Akhetaton.”

Horemheb usurped monuments and statues built by Tutankhamun and Ay, removing their names and substituting his own. But he did not violate Tutankhamun’s burial probably because of his return to the worship of Amun. In fact, it was probably during Horemheb’s reign that thieves were caught robbing Tutankhamun’s tomb. The tomb was resealed and not entered again until 1922 CE.

In addition to appropriating earlier monuments, Horemheb undertook extensive building operations of his own, especially at Thebes. He also instituted many reforms during his reign, suppressing corruption and illegal acts by members of the bureaucracy. Akhenaton had centralized Egypt’s administration and its army, which had led to many abuses. Horemheb reversed this policy, establishing law courts in all the major towns with temple priests and town mayors as judges. Furthermore, he personally rewarded those who performed their duties well. While he continued the restoration of the old religion, he did not just turn power over to the old priests. He appointed many new priests from army leaders who were fiercely loyal to him. He split legal power between viziers at Memphis and Thebes and divided the army into northern and southern branches.

The length of Horemheb’s reign is uncertain. But probably after more than a decade or two on the throne, Horemheb died childless. His successor, a military commander and vizier named Ramesses I, inaugurated a new era, the Ramesside Period (Dynasties 19 and 20). The kings of this era would first try to restore, and then desperately to maintain, Egyptian power in Syria and Palestine. However, the sun was setting on the period of Egyptian greatness.

Notes

1. The length of the reign of Thutmose II and the age of Thutmose III have been disputed, though most Egyptologists now agree that Thutmose II’s reign was brief, almost certainly less than the 13 years credited to him by Manetho. Thus, Thutmose III was probably only an infant when he became king and his regent Hatshepsut probably still a teenager herself. See Cooney (2014: 51–54, 57–58, 70, 74–79, 250, footnote 16).
2. In 2007 the members of the Egyptian Mummy Project claimed that they had been able to identify an unnamed mummy from tomb KV60 as that of Hatshepsut. See Hawass (2013: 13, 23).
3. CT scans of the mummy identified as that of Amenhotep III indicate that he was about 50

- years old at the time of his death after a reign of about 38 years (Hawass and Saleem 2016: 74–75).
4. A news release on February 6, 2014, by Mohammed Ibrahim, Egypt's Minister of Antiquities, made this claim. See, e.g., *Daily News Egypt*, February 6, 2014.
 5. Among the diseases most commonly suggested for Akhenaton are Froelich's Syndrome, a disease that would have made him severely mentally impaired (Aldred 1968: 134–135), though Aldred later abandoned this view (1988: 231–235). Another is Marfan syndrome (Brier 1998: 53–56). Giles (1970: 92) claims that Akhenaton became mentally incompetent or deranged and that Akhetaton was his “asylum” where he could play at being king (until Amenhotep III died and he became king for real).
 6. Some scholars who support the long coregency hypothesis claim that this jubilee is the same one Amenhotep III celebrated in the thirtieth year of his reign. The Aton mentioned in Amenhotep IV's *heb-sed* inscriptions, they argue, is really Amenhotep III, who had become assimilated with the Solar Orb (e.g., Weeks 1998: 230–232). However, Amenhotep III reigned into his thirty-eighth year at least. If the third year of Amenhotep IV was also the thirtieth year of his father, there had to be a 10- or 11-year coregency between the kings. Thus, we would have to accept the idea that Amenhotep III continued building operations at the temples of Amun at Thebes after his son had taken away all of those temples' revenues and made the name of Amun anathema. As we have seen, this is very dubious. Toby Wilkinson (2013: 259–260) also claims that the Aton for whom the Jubilee was held was Amenhotep III, but according to Wilkinson the Aton represented the *deceased* king, not a living coregent. He argues that Akhenaton continued the frequency of his father's Jubilees, indicating that his father was not truly dead, but rather had been assimilated with the solar orb and, as such, would reign forever. However, it does not seem that Akhenaton continued to celebrate *heb-sed* festivals for himself and his father (or the Aton) every three years throughout his reign as Amenhotep III did after year 30 and as Wilkinson's argument would suggest.
 7. E. Hornung (1999: 50) has objected that *akh*, meaning “glorified spirit,” applies “only to the soul of a deceased person,” so he prefers to translate Akhenaton's name “He who is useful to Aton.” However, Akhenaton's religion did away with the old conception of the afterlife. The spirits of the dead slept at night and during the day visited the temples of Aton in Akhetaton. This world and the world to come were blended into one, and Akhetaton is the home of the blessed dead as well as of the living. So, Akhenaton could have considered himself the “otherworldly” glorified spirit of the Aton here on earth.
 8. It used to be accepted that Nefertiti had a falling out with the king after year 13 and that her inscriptions were replaced with that of Meritaton (e.g., Pendlebury 1935: 28–29; Wilson 1951: 232; Redford 1967: 173–174). This is clearly not the case. Meritaton's inscriptions replaced Kiya's, not Nefertiti's, and she is now known to have retained her position as Chief Wife into Akhenaton's 16th regnal year (Perre 2013, 2014).
 9. Zahi Hawass and some members of his team claim that some of the embalming materials had seeped into the leg fracture, showing that it had occurred before death. Others, including some members of Hawass's team, argue that embalming material could have gotten pushed into the break either by the ancient mummifiers or modern scholars (Hawass 2013: 157; Marchant 2013: 159–160; Shaer 2014: 36).
 10. Carter found Tut's chest covered with a beaded collar or “bib” and a pectoral. He left them in place and covered them with wax to preserve the position of the beads. Perhaps that is

why Derry did not note the injuries to the chest—he was unable to examine the chest carefully. The beads and jewelry were later missing when the mummy was reexamined in 1967.

11. Owen's article is available at www.independent.co.uk/news/science/solved-the-mystery-of-king-tutankhamuns-death-8919262.html. The findings were also shown on British TV on November 10, 2013, in a documentary entitled "Tutankhamun: The Mystery of the Burnt Mummy." See the rejoinder of Z. Hawass and S. N. Saleem (2016: 104–105).
12. Some scholars think that the queen who wrote to the Hittites was Nefertiti rather than Ankhesenamun. However, others (including the authors of this book) consider this view unlikely. See "Debating the Evidence: The Zannanza Affair" in Chapter 9. See also Amanda Podany (2010: 285–289 and especially note 71 on 355–356).
13. Egyptologist Nicholas Reeves (2015) believes that the tomb originally may have been that of Nefertiti and that two other chambers may exist behind the burial chamber containing Tut's mummy. In March, 2016, after radar scans were made, it was claimed that there was a 90 percent probability that there *are* two chambers behind Tut's burial chamber walls and that they contain organic and metallic matter (Ap and Lee 2016). However, subsequent radar scans by a National Geographic team in May, 2016, found no evidence of any hidden chambers (Jarus 2016). Undoubtedly, scientific examination of the area around the tomb will continue.

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The End of the Bronze Age

As the empires of Egypt and Mitanni declined during the latter part of the fourteenth century BCE, the rising Hittite and Assyrian kingdoms were quick to take advantage, seizing territory from both and eventually destroying Mitanni. Interaction between the great powers (Hatti, Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria), or “brothers” as their rulers called one another, continued throughout the thirteenth century BCE, sometimes resulting in conflict and other times consisting of diplomatic exchanges and treaties. However, between c. 1200 and 1100 BCE this internationalism came to an end as Sea Peoples invaded western Asia and Egypt, inflation and food shortages ravaged much of the Near East, and widespread destruction of cities occurred throughout the region. The old empires were seriously weakened or totally destroyed, and the Bronze Age came to an end.

The Zenith of Hittite Power (c. 1344–1180 BCE)

Revival and Extension of the Hittite Empire

As we have seen in [Chapter 6](#), following Mursili I’s conquest of Babylon (c. 1595 BCE), infighting within the Hittite royal family produced civil wars that greatly weakened the kingdom. The new kingdom of Mitanni seized the opportunity and conducted several destructive raids into Hittite territory. Also, many former Hittite vassals in Asia Minor revolted. The territory Hittite kings could effectively control contracted to the Hittite homeland surrounding Hattusa, the capital. Thus, Hatti again became only a modest-sized Anatolian kingdom and remained so for almost 200 years.

Around 1420 BCE, however, Tudhaliya I seized power and founded a vigorous new dynasty. He inaugurated a new era known as the Hittite New

Kingdom or Empire. He and his three (or possibly four) immediate successors began to rebuild Hittite power in Asia Minor and once more challenged Mitannian control of northern Syria. However, the chronology of this era of Hittite history is very problematic and can be reconstructed only imprecisely from links with other areas, especially Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. The dates for Hittite New Kingdom rulers used here (see [Table 9.1](#)) are those of Theo van den Hout (2013: 27, [fig. 9.3](#)), a leading Hittitologist, but they still must be considered only approximate.¹

Tudhaliya I and his successors paved the way for the greatest of the Hittite kings, Suppiluliuma I (c. 1350–1320 BCE), to make Hatti the most powerful empire in the Near East. Suppiluliuma became king only after overthrowing and killing a brother who had briefly succeeded their father on the throne. It must have seemed to many that Hatti was about to resume its debilitating civil wars. However, Suppiluliuma, a former general who had the respect of the Hittite nobles, quickly gained complete control of Hatti. Then he began using his considerable abilities as a diplomat and military strategist to expand Hittite dominion.

Table 9.1 Chronology of Hittite and Egyptian Rulers c. 1420–1077 BCE

<i>Hittite New Kingdom Rulers</i>		<i>Egyptian Rulers</i>	
		The Late Eighteenth Dynasty	1400–1292
Tudhaliya I (and three or four successors)	1420–?	Thutmose IV	1400–1390
		Amenhotep III	1390–1353
Suppiluliuma I	1350–1320	Akhenaton, Smenkhkare and Neferneferuaton	1353–1334
		Tutankhamun	1334–1326
Arnuwanda II	1320–1318	Ay	1325–1320
Mursili II	1318–1290	Horemheb	1319–1292?
		The Nineteenth Dynasty	1292–1191
Muwatalli II	1290–1273	Ramesses I	1292–1291
		Seti I	1290–1279
Urhi-Teshub (= Mursili III)	1273–1267	Ramesses II	1279–1213
Hattusili III	1267–1240		

Tudhaliya IV	1240–1220		
Arnuwanda III	1210–?	Merneptah	1213–1203
Suppiluliuma II	?–1200	Seti II, Amenmose, Siptah and Tawosret	1202–1191
		The Twentieth Dynasty	1190–1077
		Sethnakhte	1190–1188
Hittite Empire destroyed	c. 1180	Ramesses III	1187–1157
		Ramesses IV through Ramesses XI	1156–1077

Suppiluliuma sought to isolate Mitanni, Hatti’s principal foe. He cultivated good relations with Akhenaton in Egypt and married the daughter of Burnaburiash II, the Kassite king of Babylon. He also signed a treaty recognizing the legitimacy of a Mitannian prince who was challenging King Tushratta’s claim to the Mitannian throne. Thus, Suppiluliuma hoped to divide Mitanni internally. He then made alliances with Isuwa to the northeast and Nuhasse to the southwest of Mitanni (see [Map 9.1](#)). So, Tushratta could expect no help from those quarters. The alliance with Nuhasse would even block the route Egyptian troops would normally take to reach Mitanni.

Tushratta could feel the Hittite vise tightening around his kingdom. He tried to break it by encouraging an anti-Hittite revolt in Isuwa and sending an army to attack Nuhasse. But Suppiluliuma was prepared. He immediately launched a massive invasion of Mitanni. He moved much more quickly than Tushratta expected, capturing and looting Wasshukanni, the Mitannian capital, before Tushratta could gather his troops. The Mitannian king was forced to flee to avoid capture by the Hittite army.

Suppiluliuma then moved westward, conquering Aleppo and other Mitannian subjects in the region and installing his son as “king” there. While he was engaged in these activities, the king of Qadesh, an Egyptian vassal, attacked the Hittite forces. Suppiluliuma defeated the attacking army, captured Qadesh, and deported its king and leading citizens to Hatti. Qadesh now became a Hittite vassal, and Amurru, Qatna, and Egypt’s other north Syrian vassals soon came under Hittite control. Thus, shortly before Akhenaton’s death, Egypt lost the northern-most section of its Asiatic empire.



Map 9.1 The Hittite Empire at Its Greatest Extent (c. 1322–1220 BCE)

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

A little more than ten years later, Egypt sent an army to regain control of Qadesh. This attack and the threat of a Mitannian revival caused Suppiluliuma to lead a large army into Syria once again. He laid siege to Carchemish, the last Mitannian ally in the region, and sent a force to invade the Land of Amka, an Egyptian vassal. It was while Suppiluliuma was involved in these activities that the Egyptian pharaoh (Tutankhamun?) died and his wife wrote to the Hittite king asking for a marriage to one of Suppiluliuma's sons (see [Chapter 8](#)). Suppiluliuma completed his conquest of Carchemish and installed his son as regent there. He also eventually sent a son to Egypt. However, the Hittite prince was killed and the union of the two great empires never took place.

Meanwhile, Mitanni's days as a great power came to an end. A group of conspirators assassinated Tushratta and Assyria took advantage of the situation by seizing the northern and eastern portions of Mitannian territory. Suppiluliuma took much of the rest. Tushratta's son was forced to become a Hittite vassal, retaining only a small portion of the former kingdom. A few years later, Suppiluliuma I died, a victim of plague brought to Hatti from the captured Egyptian territories in Syria. However, by the end of his reign (c. 1320 BCE), the Hittite Empire stretched from far western Asia Minor to northern Mesopotamia and from the Black Sea to the area just south of Qadesh (see [Map 9.1](#)).

Debating the Evidence: The Zannanza Affair

One of the longest standing debates in Hittitology is the identification of the players in what has come to be known as the Zannanza Affair. As noted earlier, while Suppiluliuma I was on campaign in Syria he received a message from the queen of Egypt seeking a Hittite prince to marry and take the throne, as her husband the pharaoh had died without an heir. Suppiluliuma eventually sent his son named Zannanza, who mysteriously died either on the way to Egypt or once he arrived. The episode was recorded in a text known as the “Deeds of Suppiluliuma,” and many attempts have been made to identify the queen and her cohorts since its publication. The Egyptian queen is called Dakhamunzu, and the pharaoh’s name is rendered in the Hittite as Nibhururiya (or Niphururiya, since the initial cuneiform sign in the word can be read as either “nib” or “nip”). Dakhamunzu was not a known Egyptian queen or princess. In fact, it is not a personal name at all, but is the Hittite rendering of *Ta Hemet Nesu* (i.e., “the wife of the King”?) in Egyptian. Of course, her identification is tied to the identification of her husband.

Scholars have long realized that her husband’s name, if read Nibhururiya, is likely the Hittite transcription of the Egyptian throne name of Tutankhamun, Nebkheperure. Many studies therefore identify Dakhamunzu with Tutankhamun’s young widow, Ankhesenamun, who was indeed left childless (e.g., Bryce 2003: 188–189, 2005: 179). However, there remains the possibility that the Hittite version of the name (if read Niphururiya) was a transcription of the throne name of Akhenaton, Neferkheperure (Harris 1975: 11–12). Distinguishing between these two pharaohs has important implications for the chronology of the Hittite dynasty. Recent re-evaluation of some Hittite texts has led some scholars to argue in support for the identification with Akhenaton rather than Tutankhamun. Two lines of evidence seem to exclude Tutankhamun. The first is the conclusion that Amarna Letter 170 describes the same Hittite attack on Amka that took place around the time of the pharaoh in question’s death as described in the *Deeds of Suppiluliuma*. Since Amarna was abandoned before the death of Tutankhamun, and no Amarna Letter can be reliably dated to his reign, it stands to reason that the pharaoh who died during the attack on Amka was Akhenaton, and not Tutankhamun (Miller 2007). The second piece of evidence in favor of Akhenaton is a translation of a text from the Annals of Mursili II stating that in his seventh and ninth regnal years Mursili had a falling out with a top Egyptian military commander named Armaya. Jared Miller (2007) argues that this Armaya can only be Horemheb in his function as a military commander before he became pharaoh. If he is correct, then Mursili’s reign was contemporary with Tutankhamun and

Tutankhamun could not have died during the reign of Mursili's father Suppiluliuma I.

Opposition to the Akhenaton hypothesis has generally centered on the problem of an existing heir to the throne, either in the form of Smenkhkare or Tutankhamun, who was generally considered an offspring of Akhenaton by a secondary wife (see [Chapter 8](#)). Recent DNA research carried out on the Amarna Period mummies by Zahi Hawass and his team may shed light on this very problem. The Egyptian team has claimed that Tutankhamun is the offspring of two unidentified mummies known as KV55 (male) and KV35YL (female) (Hawass et al. 2010, 2016: 122–123). As we have seen in [Chapter 8](#), the identification of KV55 is a contentious issue. Hawass's team identified him as Akhenaton, while many other scholars prefer Smenkhkare, now seen as a younger brother of Akhenaton. Juan Belmonte (2013) has pointed out that the genetic alleles of Tutankhamun and his offspring invalidates identifying KV55 as Akhenaton. Thus, Tutankhamun was a nephew of Akhenaton rather than his son. Technically speaking, therefore, after Akhenaton's death there was no direct male descendant.

These solutions are not without their problems. First of all, assessing the age of the mummy of KV55 remains problematic and not everyone agrees with the DNA and CT scan results of the Egyptian team. However, even if the KV55 king was Smenkhkare rather than Akhenaton as Belmonte and others argue, the problem of a male successor still exists. Smenkhkare was a coregent with Akhenaton, even if only briefly (see [Chapter 8](#)). So, Tutankhamun would still have been the son of a king (Smenkhkare), the grandson of a king (Amenhotep III), and probably the only male heir to the throne. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to hide him and his claims to the throne from the envoy sent by Suppiluliuma to check the Egyptian queen's claims. Moreover, as we have seen in [Chapter 8](#), there is a growing consensus that a female pharaoh (Neferneferuaton) acted as Akhenaton's coregent for a time, then as full king after his death. If she is the Dakhamunzu of the Hittite letters, was she Nefertiti or Meritaton? If either one already had become pharaoh as Neferneferuaton before Akhenaton died, marriage to a foreign (and hated) prince probably would have done little to consolidate her power. Ankhesenamun, widow of Tut, though, was in a much more vulnerable position at the death of her husband (Dodson 2009: 89–94; Podany 2010: 285–289, 355–356, note 71; Cline 2014: 65–70).

The Hittite evidence is also open to interpretation. Many scholars would not equate EA 170 with the episode described in Suppiluliuma's annals, nor has the equation of Armaya as the general Horemheb been widely adopted. Miller and Belmonte's correlation of the reigns of Tutankhamun and Mursili seriously undermines the traditional understanding of Hittite chronology adopted here

(see [Table 9.1](#)). For the time being therefore, these conclusions remain tentative.

Hatti's Showdown with Egypt

Suppiluliuma's successor also contracted the plague and died within a year, leaving the throne to a younger brother, Mursili II (c. 1318–1290 BCE). Despite his inexperience in military affairs, Mursili suppressed revolts in the west, totally destroying the troublesome kingdom of Arzawa, and bringing the entire western coast of Asia Minor back under Hittite control. He also crushed revolts in Syria and kept the growing power of Assyria in check. To prevent future revolts, he deported large numbers of conquered people from their homelands to Hatti. The rulers of the Neo-Assyrian Empire later adopted this policy. Despite the losses the plague inflicted on the Hittite population, Mursili preserved his empire's dominion throughout his reign. Some interesting personal episodes come down through his annals. It seems that he banished his stepmother the Tawananna (queen) after accusing her of using witchcraft to kill his wife. Later in life, he was also struck with a stroke and apparently lost his ability to speak. Despite these personal setbacks, Mursili was able to maintain the strength of the empire throughout his reign.

A major threat to Hittite power confronted Mursili's son, Muwatalli II (c. 1290–1273 BCE), however. A new dynasty intent on restoring the Egyptian Empire had arisen in Egypt. In his first regnal year (c. 1290 BCE), Seti I won a skirmish with Hittite troops during a military expedition into Syria to restore Egyptian power in the area. Seti conducted several more campaigns in Lebanon and Syria during his first six years, eventually recapturing Qadesh and Amurru, important Hittite vassals in Syria. However, Muwatalli, busy with problems within Anatolia, did not immediately respond. It's possible that he even signed a treaty with Egypt recognizing the new boundaries in order to keep Egypt from trying to proceed further northward (Murnane 1990: 37–38; Bryce 2005: 229).

Muwatalli had to deal with revolts in the west, incited by a troublesome kingdom called Ahhiyawa (see “Debating the Evidence: The Historicity of the Trojan War”). Muwatalli rushed to the support of a loyal ally, Wilusa, and eventually suppressed the uprisings. He was not able to turn his attention to Syria until the last years of Seti I, from about 1280 to 1279 BCE. Probably aware that Seti was old and sick, Muwatalli sent his forces into Syria, recapturing the city of Qadesh. He also succeeded in stirring up revolt among some of Egypt's other Syrian vassals. Possibly to be close to the Syrian arena, Muwatalli chose

to relocate the court to a city in the south, Tarhuntassa, thus abandoning Hattusa after over 300 years of royal occupation.

Seti's successor, Ramesses II, began gathering a 20,000-man force to crush the Syrian revolts and regain control of Qadesh. In the spring of his fifth year (c. 1275 BCE), he led this large army north against the Hittites. Long inscriptions on several temples in Egypt describe what happened next. As he approached Qadesh, the four divisions of his army were strung out over many miles. Captured Hittite spies misled Ramesses into believing that the Hittites were still far to the north, when in fact Muwatalli and a huge army were hidden just to the east of Qadesh. As Ramesses II and the Division of Amun began setting up camp west of Qadesh, and the Division of Re was approaching from the south, the Hittite chariot force launched a surprise attack across a ford in the Orontes River. The Division of Re was shattered and its disorganized remnants fled toward the Egyptian camp followed by the Hittite chariots. In the camp, the Egyptians had finally succeeded in beating the truth out of a couple of captured Hittite scouts, but Ramesses had barely begun calling his division to arms when the Hittite juggernaut burst upon them.

Much of the Division of Amun panicked and was scattered. However, the pharaoh showed great personal bravery, leading the few chariots that were ready in a charge to blunt the Hittite attack. Just when everything seemed lost, Ramesses and his army were saved by two fortuitous events. First, some of the Hittite charioteers began looting the Egyptian camp instead of continuing the attacks on Ramesses and his small contingent of chariots. Second, an Egyptian force made up primarily of allied Canaanite troops arrived from the coast. The Canaanite chariots attacked the Hittites' left flank, catching them totally by surprise. (This attack is depicted in [Figure 8.3](#) in [Chapter 8](#).) As the Hittite chariot force briefly fell back to regroup, Ramesses was able to organize his forces enough to launch several counterattacks. The sudden change in fortune seems to have destroyed Hittite morale, and their chariots were soon in full retreat. Finding themselves surrounded and backed against the river, the confused Hittite forces abandoned their chariots and swam to the safety of the east bank.

Though almost all of Muwatalli's chariots had been lost, his infantry (which outnumbered the entire Egyptian army) was able to hold its own against Ramesses's subsequent attacks. Recognizing that he could not destroy the Hittite army and recapture Qadesh, Ramesses marched the remnants of his army home. Once back in Egypt, he celebrated the campaign as a great triumph. However, as Ramesses II retreated southward, Muwatalli regrouped his forces and followed, regaining control of Amurru and seizing Syrian territory as far south as Damascus. Though the outcome of the Battle of Qadesh is often called a draw, it was really a Hittite victory because it kept the

Egyptians from regaining Qadesh and, in its aftermath, the Hittites actually extended their territory (Tyldesley 2001: 73).

A few years after the Battle of Qadesh, Muwatalli died. His son Urhi-Teshub (a second-rank child who renamed himself Mursili III) reigned for only a few years (c. 1273–1267 BCE). His powerful uncle, Hattusili, resented the young king's attempts to curb his own power and staged a successful coup, exiling his nephew to Syria.

Hattusili III (c. 1267–1240 BCE) inherited an uneasy truce with Egypt. Ramesses II still controlled Palestine and the Phoenician cities, and had not relinquished the dream of regaining the lost Syrian territories. He had led two more abortive Egyptian incursions into Syria early in the reign of Urhi-Teshub. However, it became evident that the warfare was exhausting both powers. Neither the Hittites nor the Egyptians had the strength to prevail absolutely, so they settled for an undeclared armistice. Eventually, Hattusili and Ramesses discerned that their conflict was aiding only Assyria. Adad-Nirari I of Assyria (c. 1296–1264 BCE) and his successor, Shalmaneser I (c. 1263–1234 BCE), had first conquered and then destroyed Hanigalbat, a small remnant of the old Mitannian kingdom. Assyrian power had been growing rapidly, and Assyrian expansion was a threat to both Hatti and Egypt. So, in 1259 BCE, sixteen years after the battle of Qadesh, Ramesses II and Hattusili III made peace.

Fortunately, both Egyptian and Hittite copies of the treaty have survived. It declared an end to the fighting between Egypt and Hatti, but it did not discuss the territories in Syria that had been in dispute. Thus, it implicitly recognized the then-current border between Egyptian and Hittite holdings. Qadesh and most of western Syria would remain Hittite. However, Egyptian control over the Phoenician ports was accepted, and Egypt was granted access to Ugarit, which had been closed to her for almost a century. Moreover, this treaty not only ended the warfare, it made the former enemies allies (see [Document 9.1](#)). It also included extradition clauses, as was common in Hittite treaties. However, it stressed that extradited individuals were to be treated leniently once they were returned. The version of the treaty sent from Egypt to Hatti also explicitly recognized the right of Hattusili's son to succeed him. Thus, Egypt abandoned its previous support for Urhi-Teshub's right to the throne. At the end of the treaty, Egyptian and Hittite deities were invoked as witnesses and guarantors of the pact and afterwards the friendship was sealed with the diplomatic marriage of Ramses II to two of Hattusili's daughters.

Document 9.1 The Treaty between Hattusili III and Ramesses II

The terms of the following peace treaty between Hatti and Egypt were worked out in negotiations. Then the Egyptians translated their version of the agreement into Akkadian, inscribed it on a silver tablet, and sent it to Hattusa. Hattusili III sent his version, also in Akkadian on a silver tablet, to Pi-Ramesse, the Egyptian capital. Ramesses II had the Hittite version translated into Egyptian and inscribed in hieroglyphs on temple walls at Karnak and the Ramesseum. Hattusili III had the Egyptian version copied on clay tablets for the Hittite archives. These copies of both versions survive, and they do not differ significantly. The following is a translation of the Karnak inscription in which Hattusili III (or Hattusil III as K. A. Kitchen writes his name) addresses Ramesses II. Material in parentheses or square brackets is part of Kitchen's translation (1982: 78–79). Boldface printing has been used here to indicate Kitchen's summaries of untranslated portions of the treaty.

Behold, Hattusil III...binds himself by treaty to Ramesses II...beginning from today, in order to create peace and good brotherhood between us forever—he being friendly and at peace with me, and I being friendly and at peace with him, forever....

The Great Ruler of Hatti shall never trespass against the land of Egypt, to take anything from it. Ramesses II... shall never trespass against the land of Hatti, to take anything from it....

If some other foe should come against the territories of Ramesses II..., and he sends word to the Great Ruler of Hatti, saying, 'Come with me as ally against him!', —then the Great Ruler of Hatti shall act [with him, and] shall slay his foes. But if the Great Ruler of Hatti is not disposed to go (personally), then he shall send his troops and chariotry and they shall slay his foes.

And So Reciprocally, Ramesses II for Hattusil

If an Egyptian, or two, or three, shall flee, and they come to the Great Ruler of Hatti, then the Great Ruler of Hatti shall seize them and have them brought back to Ramesses II, Great Ruler of Egypt. As for the person handed back to Ramesses II, Great Ruler of Egypt, let not his error be charged against him, let not his house, his wives or his children be destroyed, and let him not be killed.

And Similarly in the Other Direction, in the Paragraph That Followed...

As for these terms, a thousand gods of the deities male and female who belong to Hatti, together with a thousand gods of the deities male and female who belong to Egypt—they are with me as witnesses, and they have heard these terms....

As for him who does not keep them, the thousand gods of Hatti together with the

thousand gods of Egypt shall destroy his house, his land and his servants.

As for him who shall keep these terms (written) on this silver tablet, Hittites or Egyptians,... the thousand gods of Hatti and the thousand gods of Egypt will cause him to flourish, will make him to live, together with his household, his land and his servants.

Hattusili was succeeded by his son, Tudhaliya IV (c. 1240–1220 BCE). However, Hittitologists have uncovered few written sources for his reign or those of his two successors. His early years seem to have been peaceful, allowing him to concentrate on religious reforms and the creation of relief carvings of divine processions at Yazilikaya, near Hattusa. The arts flourished under Hattusili and Tudhaliya, as both concentrated on embellishing ritual sites both within the city and around the empire (see [Figure 9.1](#)). However, Assyrian power continued to grow, and Tudhaliya was defeated in battle by the Assyrians in the eastern provinces. At some time during Tudhaliya's reign, there also may have been a coup that briefly put Kurunta, a son of Muwatalli, in power in Hattusa. If so, Tudhaliya regained his throne and eventually passed it on to his son and grandson. However, Hatti's power was waning and there were troubles on the outskirts of the empire, in the southeast and west. Around 1180 BCE, Hattusa itself was abandoned, its palaces and temples burned, and its line of Great Kings gone. The empire was finished, done in by causes that, as we shall see, are still being debated.



Figure 9.1 Bas-Relief of a Hittite Warrior God on the Fortifications of Hattusa

The Hittites excelled at stone construction and embellished outdoor sites of worship with carvings of gods and kings. The photograph shows a replica; the original was moved to the Archaeological Museum in Ankara, Turkey.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archives at Art Resource, New York.

Hittite Culture

Economy, Society, and Government

From the time they settled in Anatolia through the height of their New Kingdom Period, the Hittites remained essentially rural, village-dwelling folk. Their land contained a few moderate-sized towns and ceremonial centers connected to the royal palace, but large cities like Hattusa were extremely rare. Most people lived in small, self-sufficient agricultural communities surrounded by arable land from which they eked out a living, some owning their own land, others leasing it from the crown.

The Hittites' principal crops were barley and emmer wheat supplemented by peas, beans, and various fruits, especially apples, figs, and apricots. Vineyards on the hills produced an abundance of grapes that were used primarily to make wine. The villagers had beehives for honey, and obtained dairy products and, occasionally, meat from herds of sheep, goats, and cattle. They also raised horses for warfare, and utilized a Mitannian manual on training them. In the Anatolian mountains, the Hittites found deposits of silver, copper, lead, tin, and iron. However, despite an earlier generation's emphasis on the Hittite use of iron, it was not the reason for Hittite military dominance (Muhly et al. 1985). They had not yet perfected the techniques for smelting iron and working it properly. Therefore, the Hittites primarily worked with meteoric iron and used it mostly for ornaments and statues. The few iron weapons they made were no stronger than the bronze ones of the time. Iron remained rare and more precious than gold throughout the second millennium BCE.

Most members of Hittite society were peasants, both free and dependent, like medieval serfs. Conquered peoples were often brought back to Hatti and resettled to serve the needs of the state. Like other ancient peoples, the Hittites also owned slaves. People could become slaves through debt, or punishment for crimes, or most often through capture in warfare. Hittite laws secured certain rights and obligations to slaves, and some slaves could accumulate wealth and land (Hoffner 1995: Vol. 1, 565). On the other hand, slave owners had the right to inflict physical punishments, even death on disobedient servants.

Like most ancient societies, Hittite society was patriarchal and patrilineal, with the male elders of the local households forming each village's primary governing body. However, free women retained some rights. In certain (though rare) situations, a mother could disown her son. Also, while the father "gave" his daughter in marriage, his wife seems to have had some say in choosing the prospective husband. Hittite law prohibited marriage or sexual intercourse between close relatives, even relatives by marriage. However, there was an exception to this ban. If a man died, his widow would be married first to his

brother, then (if the brother died) to his father, then if the father died, to his nephew. This custom is similar to the levirate marriage of early Israel (Deuteronomy 25:5–6), which was designed to perpetuate the family of a man who died childless. But since the Hittite law does not mention children, it was probably meant to provide for widows who had no one to look after them and to keep them within the extended family.

The example just cited is one of many that suggest that Hittite society was regulated both by written laws and by traditional customs. As in Mesopotamia, there were written law codes expressed in conditional terms—“if a person does such and such, then....” Again, like Mesopotamian codes, the Hittite written laws probably derive from judgments in court cases. Many of their details suggest individual cases, and in one instance, the law even summarizes a case brought before the king. The written laws were probably meant to clarify problem areas in the customary rules of behavior that had caused disputes. It is also clear that the law code was revised on at least one occasion to make it conform to then current standards. In many places it mentions a punishment used formerly, but states that “now” the king has decreed another (usually milder) penalty.

Localized village self-government coexisted with the higher administration of the kingdom. Provincial governors, garrison commanders, members of palace departments, and other royal officials were drawn from a small number of families or clans that comprised the Hittite aristocracy. The most important of the noble families, of course, was the “Great Family” of the king. Most Hittite kings reserved the highest positions in the state for members of their own family. The wealthy and powerful nobles, “the fighting men and servants of the king,” had a kind of feudal relationship to the ruler. They swore to give him loyal service (military and otherwise), and he assigned them estates from his vast land holdings. The aristocratic state officials were expected to cooperate with the local councils of elders to administer justice, perform religious rites, and ensure the common people’s safety and welfare.

The Hittite king was the highest authority in the state. He was commander of the armies, chief priest, highest judge, and chief administrator, ultimately responsible for all domestic and foreign affairs. He was a “Great King” controlling many subject states that had their own vassal kings. During the era of the empire, his power became virtually absolute. New Kingdom kings assumed the titles “My Sun” and “Hero, beloved of the god (or goddess) X.” However, during their lifetimes, they were not believed to be divine. They were the favorites and agents of the Sun Goddess of Arinna, the Weather God of Hatti, and the other deities. Only at death did a king become a god and receive cult offerings at the place where his remains were deposited.

An unusual feature of the Hittite monarchy was the position of the queen.

She bore the title *Tawananna*, and if she outlived her husband, she retained her position. A new king's consort could be only "the king's wife" until the previous *Tawananna* (usually the king's mother) died. The duties of the *Tawananna* were essentially religious, but in addition, she often participated in affairs of state. For example, Puduhepa, wife and *Tawananna* of Hattusili III, carried on independent correspondence with the Egyptian royal family as well as with several vassal rulers. She also usually was associated with her husband in proclamations and other state documents.

The powerful New Kingdom Hittite rulers maintained their empire as much by diplomacy as by military might. As we have seen, they often used alliances to isolate real or potential enemies. They also bound vassal kings to Hatti by treaties that clearly defined the vassals' relationship with the Great King. Fortunately, a large number of these vassal treaties have survived. They always began with a historical preamble stressing the gracious and beneficial actions Hittite kings had performed for the vassal ruler or state in the past. They then usually defined the vassal's territory and listed his obligations. The primary obligations were exclusive loyalty to the Great King, agreement to support his designated successor, obedience to his demand for soldiers in time of war, turning over to him any of his foes who sought refuge in the vassal state, and annual payment of tribute. For his part, the Hittite king usually promised to protect the vassal against all enemies. The treaties then ended with a list of gods who would punish whoever violated the agreement. Some scholars have compared these vassal treaties to the covenant that the Bible claims God made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Treaties also regulated the relationships between the Hittite king and the rulers of the other great powers. However, as these agreements were between equals, the clauses were reciprocal, imposing equal obligations on both parties (see [Document 9.1](#)).

Religion

Many different divinities were worshipped in the various parts of Anatolia. Though the Hittites eventually brought these areas into their empire, they did not impose Hittite religion on them. On the contrary, they allowed local religions and cults to continue and even supported them. Over the course of Hittite history, foreign cults became incorporated into a messy amalgamation of divinities worshipped by the Hittite rulers. In fact, Hittite texts often refer to the "thousand gods of Hatti" and at least several hundred deities are known by name. These were worshipped in large temples; Hattusa had more than thirty. The Hittites were unusual in that they also revered and worshipped at spaces

in the landscape. Special rock formations, springs, and mountains were all sacred to the Hittites and served as places of worship. During the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries, the Hittite kings embellished these places with carved reliefs and standing sculptures, marking them as part of the official state cult.

Hittite religion contained a mixture of deities, myths, and rites drawn from many sources, including the pre-Hittite Hattians, Mesopotamians, and especially the Hurrians. Because of these borrowed features, many of the surviving Hittite myths concern deities who were not featured in the official state religion. The two most important deities in the state religion were the Sun Goddess of Arinna and her consort, the Weather God of Hatti (occasionally called the Weather God of Heaven). Arinna was a holy city within a day's journey of Hattusa, though its exact location is unknown. Its cult centered on the sun goddess who was also the principal goddess of fertility. She was hailed as "Queen of the Land of Hatti, Queen of Heaven and Earth, mistress of the kings and queens of the Land of Hatti, directing the government of the King and Queen of Hatti" (Gurney 1990: 115).

It is the Weather God of Hatti, rather than the sun god, who is emphasized in most Hittite texts. His life-giving rains caused his wife, the Sun Goddess of Arinna, to conceive. He was also a war god (see [Figure 9.1](#); he may be the warrior god depicted in this relief). His power was displayed in thunder, lightning, and the ferocity of storms. As in Syria and Palestine, the Weather God's sacred animal was the bull, which at times could symbolically represent him. Similar weather gods were worshipped throughout Asia Minor, but, as mentioned, these other gods retained their local names. So, when writing the names of most gods, the Hittites used cuneiform logograms that could be read as different names in different parts of the Empire.

Telepinu, a god of agriculture and fertility, was the protagonist of a number of missing god myths. In these myths, Telepinu's temporary disappearances cause hardship and human suffering, and life and well-being are only returned when he was found and brought home. This story embodied the Hittite understanding of nature's yearly cycle of seasons. It also occasionally could be used to explain longer periods of drought, famine, or plague. However, the Hittites usually blamed such irregular disasters on the anger of some deity, either Hittite or foreign.

During the New Kingdom, as the Hittites expanded into Syria and eventually conquered Mitanni, Hurrian religion became increasingly influential in Anatolia. Teshub, the Hurrian name for the Weather God, began to be used in Hatti as well as in Hurrian-speaking areas. Hittite worship of Teshub's consort, the fertility goddess Hepat, also spread widely. Hepat's popularity was especially due to the devotion given her by Hattusili III's queen, Puduhepa. The Hurrians themselves had borrowed many

Mesopotamian gods, often equating them with native Hurrian deities. These they also passed on to the Hittites, especially Ishtar (Shaushka in Hurrian), whom Hattusili III regarded as his patron goddess. The Hittite Ishtar, however, was more a goddess of war than of love (Bryce 2002: 146–147). The great sculptured processions of deities at Yazilikaya near Hattusa depict the essentially Hurrian pantheon with Teshub, Hepat, and their son Sharruma at the head, worshipped in Hatti during the latter part of the New Kingdom (see [Figure 9.2](#)).

To keep the gods satisfied or to win back their favor when they were angry, the Hittites performed many types of religious rituals. At each cult center, the gods were fed daily by offerings of food and drink (usually beer). The deities also received animal sacrifices, particularly at the great festivals. Even human sacrifice, though rare, was not unknown. A ritual to purify the army after a defeat directs that

they 'cut through' a man, a goat, a puppy, and a little pig; they place half on this side and half on that side,... light fires on this side and on that, and the troops walk right through, and when they come to the river they sprinkle water over them.

(Gurney 1990: 126)

The text does not indicate whether the sacrificial victim was a member of the Hittite army or a prisoner of war. However, he was probably a war captive since another broken text has “a prisoner” listed with other creatures to be sacrificed.



Figure 9.2 Central Group of Deities in Chamber A at Yazilikaya

Teshub (on the left standing on two mountain gods) faces Hepat (his wife and consort, standing on a lion). They were the supreme state deities under Hattusili III and Tudhaliya IV. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

The king, who was the High Priest of all the gods, played the paramount role in most of the major rites and festivals. The most important religious festival, or actually group of festivals, took place in the spring. It consisted of a series of rites at several different cult centers over a period of thirty-eight days. This festival was connected with the reawakening of the earth at springtime. It may also have been the Hittite New Year festival during which the gods fixed the fates for the coming year. Whatever its purpose, it was important enough that Mursili II once had to leave a military campaign in order to return to Hattusa to celebrate it.

Like most other ancient peoples, the Hittites used various means to determine the will of the gods. Deities could take the initiative in communicating with humans by sending unusual signs or portents or delivering messages through dreams or ecstatic seizures. Usually, though, mortals had to discover the divine will through the process of divination. Hittites generally took omens before military campaigns or other important actions. They also used them to learn the reasons for plagues or other disasters.

The three major Hittite methods of divination were essentially derived from Mesopotamia. Priests could sacrifice an animal and study the pattern of folds on its liver or other entrails. They could observe the activities of birds (some actions were considered favorable and others unfavorable). Or, female soothsayers could pose questions to the gods, then cast lots to learn the answers. An interesting method of divination unique to the Hittites was a snake ritual, in which snakes were released in a basin of water marked with categories such as “life”, “sin”, and “house,” and the snake’s movement through this basin could be interpreted by a diviner to answer various inquiries.

In addition to the major rituals, Hittite religion contained many folk rites to purify individuals, ward off evil, reconcile brothers, and otherwise deal with personal problems. One of these rites, designed to alleviate sickness or trouble, is similar to the Israelite scapegoat ritual (Leviticus 16:8–10). A priestess went through elaborate ceremonies that ended with her magically transferring the problems to a captive mouse. She then released the mouse, beseeching it to carry the troubles far away.

Languages and Literature

Many different languages were spoken within the Hittite Empire, and phrases or brief passages from several of them are found in Hittite texts. However, the overwhelming majority of the documents in the Hittite archives were written in either Akkadian or Hittite (Neshite). As noted in [Chapter 8](#), Akkadian, the Semitic language of Mesopotamia, had become the international language of diplomacy in the Near East during the Late Bronze Age. Thus, most Hittite diplomatic letters and treaties were written in Akkadian (see [Document 9.1](#)). Since the Sumerians originally created the cuneiform script borrowed to write Hittite as well as Akkadian, there were also a few Sumerian-Hittite word lists at Hattusa. These were used to teach scribes the Hittite meanings of common Sumerian (and Akkadian) logograms.

Naturally, many of the tablets excavated at Boğazköy (Hattusa) were written in Hittite (which, as we have seen, its speakers actually called Neshite), the language of the rulers of the Hittite Empire and a member of the Indo-European family of tongues. In addition to documents in Akkadian and Hittite, the Hittite tablets contained many passages and a few complete works in Hurrian. The Hurrian sections of Hittite texts are generally religious songs or ritual utterances. A fragmentary Hurrian translation of the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* was also found at Hattusa. However, the most important Hurrian document in the Hittite archives is a treatise on horse training by a Mitannian

named Kikkuli. Though most of the text is in Hurrian, many of its technical terms are actually Indo-Iranian words related to Sanskrit. As noted in [Chapter 6](#), these “fossil” terms probably resulted from early Hurrian contact with groups of Indo-Iranians (most likely in northwestern Iran).

Other languages are found in Hittite texts only in isolated passages, phrases, or words within longer documents. A number of religious incantations and prayers in Hattian, the pre-Hittite language of the area, occur in ritual texts. Also, there are more extensive passages in a language called Luwian. This Indo-European language, closely related to Hittite, was spoken in parts of western, southwestern, and southern Asia Minor, including Arzawa. Around the middle of the second millennium BCE, Luwian speakers created a hieroglyphic script to write their language. The Hittites used this Luwian hieroglyphic writing on all monumental sculptures and inscriptions as well as on all of the royal and non-royal seals of the New Kingdom era (see [Figure 9.3](#)). Luwian was by then almost certainly the spoken language of most of the Hittite Empire, including the royal court at Hattusa. It survived the collapse of the Hittite Empire and became the main language and script of the later Neo-Hittite kingdoms (see [Chapter 10](#)).



Figure 9.3 A Hittite Royal Seal Impression

The king's name, Muwatalli, appears in the Hittite (Luwian) hieroglyphic script in the center and cuneiform around the edge. The king is shown dressed in priestly garb in the embrace of the Weather God.

From O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (London: Penguin Books).

In addition to legal texts, diplomatic documents, ritual texts, and “scientific” works on omens, horoscopes, and medicine, the Hittite archives also contained compositions of a more literary nature. These include epics, myths, legends, royal testaments, and annals. The inspiration and models for most of these works came from Mesopotamia by way of the Hurrians. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* seems to have been a Hittite favorite. In addition to a Hurrian version, at Hattusa, archaeologists uncovered fragmentary copies of the original Akkadian epic and a Hittite translation of it. They also found Hittite versions of legends about Sargon of Akkad and Naram-Sin.

Many of the Hittite myths were Hurrian in origin. One of the most complete

myths described how the god Kumarbi overthrew Anu, the divine King of Heaven. In the process, he bit off and swallowed Anu's genitals. However, Anu's seed impregnated Kumarbi with several gods, including the Weather God, Teshub. When Teshub emerged, he vanquished Kumarbi, thus becoming the new King of Heaven. This story seems to have inspired the Greek myth recorded in Hesiod's *Theogony*. According to Hesiod, after overthrowing and emasculating his father Ouranos, Kronos swallowed each of his newborn sons (except Zeus, for whom his mother substituted a wrapped-up stone) to prevent any of them from challenging him. When Zeus grew up, he defeated and replaced his father as ruler of the heavens. Many scholars are also convinced that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* influenced the development of parts of the Heracles (Hercules) legend. These Near Eastern stories (in addition to Mesopotamian mathematics and time-reckoning systems) probably reached Greece from the Hurrians via Phoenicia and/or western Asia Minor via the Hittites.

The most fascinating elements of Hittite literature are their historical writings: preambles to official proclamations and treaties, royal testaments, and annals. It has already been mentioned that the Hittites used introductory recitations of past events to provide the context and/or vindication for specific decrees or pacts. Like the Mesopotamians, Hittites believed that the past was not just a meaningless series of accidental events. It had a pattern from which humans could draw lessons. Mursili II (c. 1321–1295 BCE) took the step of using historical narrative not just to explain particular proclamations or treaties, but also to clarify and justify the events of his entire reign. Furthermore, he not only produced annals for his own reign, but also for that of his father, Suppiluliuma. Thus, James G. Macqueen (1986: 152) goes so far as to argue that “in thus examining the past, stressing its value and interpreting its patterns in terms of human behaviour” the Hittites have a reasonable claim to be described as the Fathers of History.²

Later kings followed Mursili II's example, though often only fragments of their annals have survived. The Hittite historical writings are similar to those of Mesopotamia and Egypt in that their main purpose was to glorify the gods and explain the actions of kings. Success and victory were seen as the result of divine favor and obedience to the gods' will. Calamity could occur because someone offended the deities. However, the Hittites believed that disasters could also be due to human errors or incompetence. They were willing to acknowledge that even their kings made mistakes. For example, Mursili II conceded in his *Comprehensive Annals* that his father's preoccupation with Syria allowed the Kaskeans to devastate and occupy portions of Hatti. Furthermore, sometimes the Hittites went so far as to admit royal sins. In his plague prayers, Mursili II confesses that the plague that ravaged Hittite lands from the last years of Suppiluliuma into his own reign was due to

Suppiluliuma's transgressions. The Hittite king had failed to perform a sacrifice for the River Euphrates. He had also broken two oaths, first by rebelling against and killing his brother, and later, by violating a treaty with Egypt when he invaded Amka. These and similar acknowledgments are like a breath of fresh air after one has been reading Egyptian New Kingdom accounts in which the king can do no wrong and any misfortune, if admitted, is blamed on his advisors, his cowardly army, or some other scapegoat.

The Twilight of the Egyptian Empire (c. 1292–1150 BCE)

The Empire's Final Flash of Greatness

Ramesses I, the general who succeeded Horemheb, had a very short reign (c. 1292–1291 BCE). However, he passed the throne to his son, Seti I (c. 1290–1279 BCE), thus initiating the Nineteenth Dynasty. Seti served as general and vizier under his father, and he may have become co-regent during Ramesses I's last two or three months on the throne. As we have seen, he conducted several campaigns in Lebanon and Syria, trying to regain Egyptian territory. Seti I also conducted campaigns against the Libyans and Nubians, securing Egypt's western and southern borders.

Seti's reign is most remembered, though, for his building projects and the quality of their decoration. During the reigns of Horemheb and Ramesses I, plans had been made for a large new hypostyle hall in the Temple of Amun at Karnak. However, the work had barely begun by the time Seti I came to the throne. Seti completed at least half of this massive structure, leaving the rest to be finished by his son and successor, Ramesses II. The Great Hypostyle Hall, considered by many the most breathtaking sight in Egypt, is 335 feet wide and 174 feet long. The huge Paris landmark, the Notre Dame Cathedral, could fit within the walls of this single hall. It contains 134 gigantic columns—a dozen seventy-five-foot-high central columns with open papyrus flower capitals that measure fifty feet in circumference. Along the sides, there are 122 slightly shorter columns with closed bud capitals (see [Figure 9.4](#)). The reliefs decorating this and other monuments of Seti's reign are considered among the best ever produced in ancient Egypt.

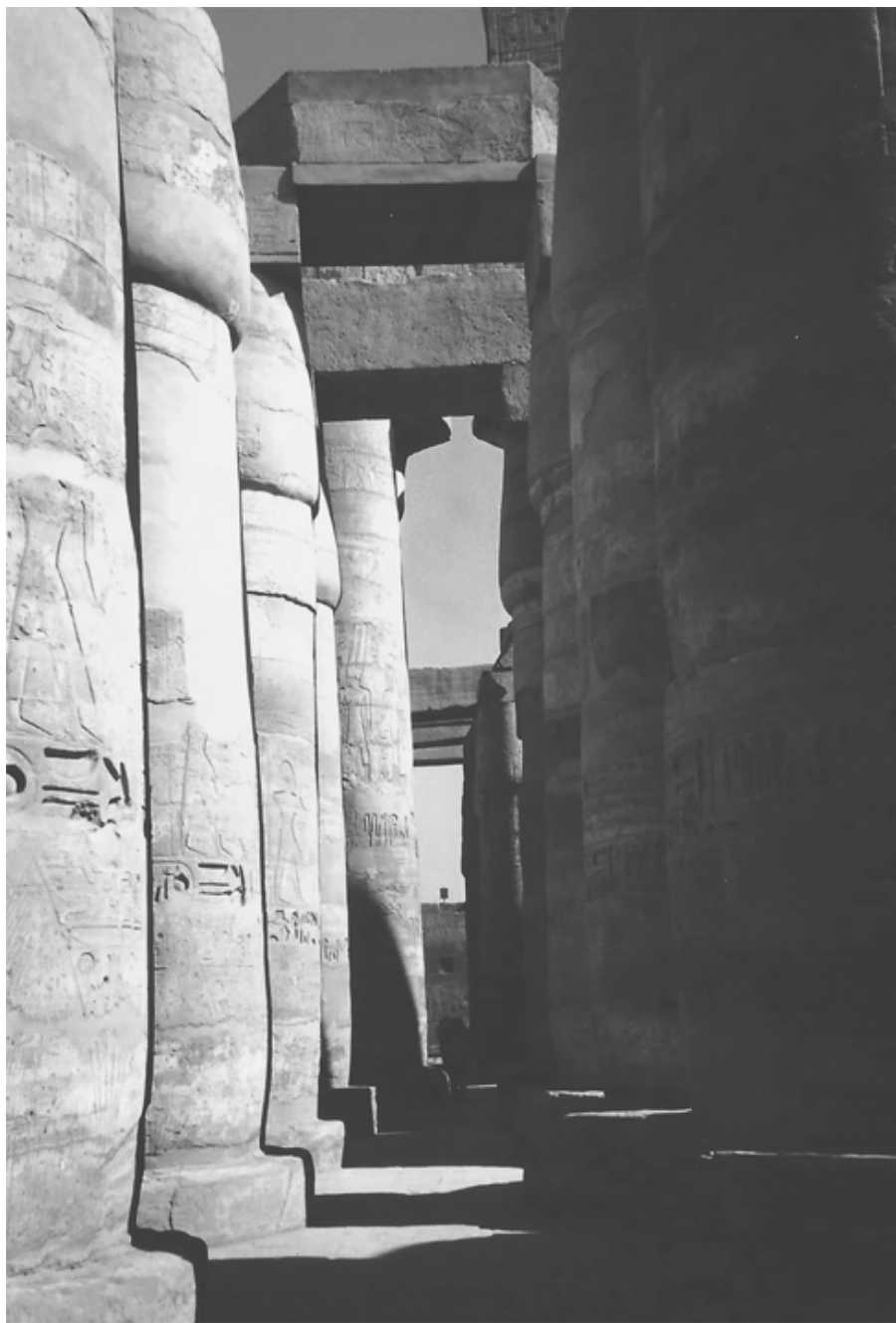


Figure 9.4 The Great Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Amun at Karnak

This view, looking across the Great Hall, shows side columns in the foreground. Two of the taller central columns are visible beyond them.

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Seti undertook many other construction projects, including a temple for

Osiris at Abydos. A noteworthy feature of this temple was the so-called Hall of Records or Abydos King List, where Seti I and his young son Ramesses are depicted standing before rows of cartouches of earlier kings stretching back to the beginnings of Egyptian history. Another extraordinary work was his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. It is not only the longest and deepest in the valley, but it is also generally acknowledged to be the most exquisitely decorated.

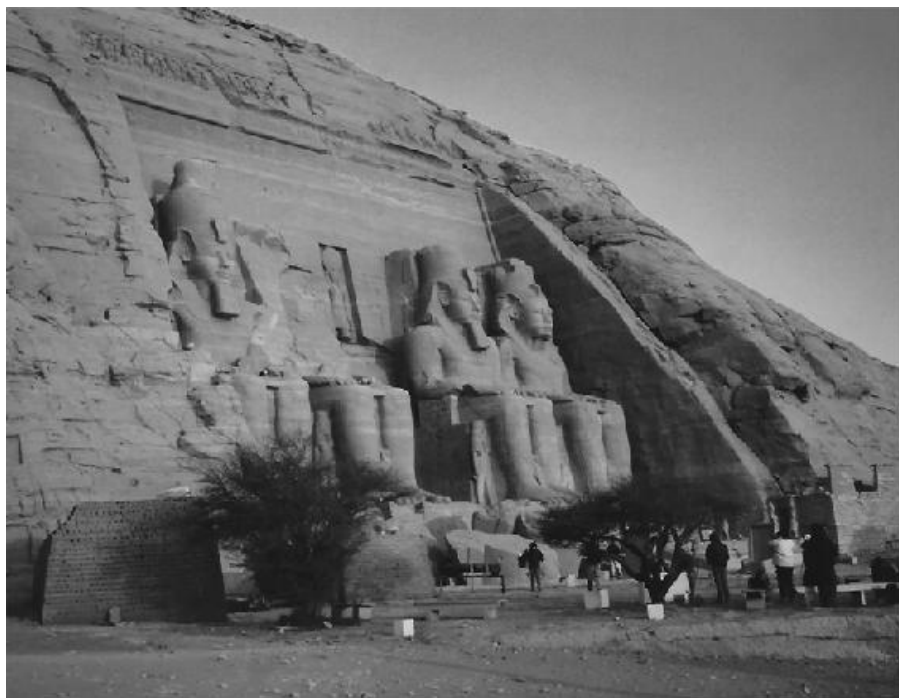
Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 BCE) became co-regent with his father for two to four years at the end of Seti's reign (Tyldesley 2001: 46–47). However, he dated his reign only from the time of Seti's death. At that time, the Hittites were again flexing their muscles in Syria. Recognizing the need for a marshaling point closer to Canaan than Memphis, Ramesses began building a new Delta capital, Pi-Ramesse (or Per-Ramesses, “House [or Domain] of Ramesses”), partly on the site of ancient Avaris. It was here that he mobilized the armies for his Asiatic campaigns. This site is usually identified with the Raamses that the Hebrew slaves in the Bible were forced to build, and thus Ramesses II is often claimed to be the pharaoh of the Exodus (see [Chapter 13](#)). Nothing of Ramesses's own inscriptions, however, helps to verify the biblical account.

Ramesses's attempts to regain control over Syria were unsuccessful, as we have seen. Nevertheless, he claimed to have won a great victory at Qadesh and had scenes of his “triumph” carved on his major monuments. Though not as great a conqueror as he wanted people to believe, Ramesses II truly was a great builder. He erected a palace, temples, and other structures at Pi-Ramesse, which became a large and beautiful city. At Thebes, he finished the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, added a court and pylon to the Luxor Temple, and constructed a grand mortuary temple (the Ramesseum) and a tomb for himself. At Memphis, he enlarged the Temple of Ptah and had his son Khaemwaset construct a new shrine and underground burial place for future Apis Bulls (the Serapeum). He also had several other temples built in Egypt and Nubia. In addition, he laid claim to many of the monuments of his predecessors, placing his name on earlier temples and royal statues.

These other works pale, however, in comparison with his greatest construction project, the temples at Abu Simbel in Nubia. These two temples were carved directly out of the sandstone mountains. The façade of the Great Temple is like a large recessed pylon with four gigantic (sixty-five-foot) seated images of Ramesses II in front of it (see [Figure 9.5](#)). Its chambers extend some 200 feet into the mountain, ending in a sanctuary with statues of four deities cut out of the rock. Twice a year, on February 21 and October 21, the rising sun came directly through the entrance and bathed three of the statues in light—the deified Ramesses II flanked by Amun and Re-Horakhty. The fourth god, Ptah, a god of darkness and the underworld, remained in shadow. The smaller temple nearby had four standing statues of Ramesses II and two of his favorite

wife, Nefertari, carved into its façade. This temple was dedicated to the goddess Hathor and her living personification, Nefertari. The creation of Lake Nasser by the construction of the High Dam at Aswan in the 1960s CE would have permanently flooded these monuments. So, through an international effort, the temples were cut into blocks and removed from the mountainside. They were reassembled on the mountaintop, beyond the reach of the lake's waters.

By the time Ramesses II became king, he already had two major wives, Nefertari and Isis-nofret, and at least five sons and two daughters. During his more than sixty-six-year reign, he would take many more wives, including his younger sister, three of his daughters, and several Hittite, Syrian, and Babylonian princesses. Before his death, he would boast of having sired more than 100 children. However, he lived so long that many of his children died before he did. It is thought that many of his sons, at least those who predeceased him, were buried in a recently uncovered gigantic tomb in the Valley of the Kings with more than sixty-five chambers found so far (Weeks 1998). Ramesses himself, at the age of ninety or ninety-one, was buried in a nearby tomb, but his mummy was later moved by priests to protect it. Now housed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Ramesses is one of the best preserved mummies of the collection. Merneptah, Ramesses II's thirteenth son, was already sixty years old when he finally succeeded his father on the throne.



Ramesses created this and another temple at Abu Simbel in Nubia in honor of the god Re-Horakhty. The colossal figures of the king (sixty-five feet high) with statues of conquered enemies below him was a powerful reminder of the king's physical and spiritual power. Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Invasions of the Sea Peoples

Merneptah (c. 1213–1203 BCE) immediately had to deal with a series of major problems. Egypt's Hittite allies appealed for help because of famine in their land. So, the Egyptian pharaoh responded by dispatching shiploads of grain to Hatti. Then, in his third year, whether prompted by similar agricultural problems or other causes, revolts broke out in Palestine and Syria. Merneptah quickly moved northward and crushed the opposition, according to his famous Victory Stele (see [Document 9.2](#)). However, he was not able to savor his triumph very long. During his fifth year (c. 1209 BCE), Libyan tribes, supplemented by five other groups (Shardana, Shekelesh, Akawasha, Lukka, and Tursha), invaded the Egyptian Delta. Merneptah's inscription on a wall of the Karnak temple suggests that these marauders also were experiencing famine:

They spend their time going about the land, fighting, to fill their bodies daily. They come to the land of Egypt, to seek the necessities of their mouths.

(Breasted 1905: Vol. 3, §580, 244)

The Libyans' allies are described as “northerners” or “of the Countries of the Sea,” so scholars have come to call them “Sea Peoples.” Some of these Sea Peoples had been known in the eastern Mediterranean area for more than a century. One of the mid-fourteenth-century BCE Amarna Letters (EA 38) refers to piratical raids on coastal towns in Cyprus and Syria by the Lukka people. The Shardana also had launched surprise attacks by sea, occasionally pillaging coastal areas of Egypt from the time of Amenhotep III on. Ramesses II complained about these pirates “whose renown crossed the sea” and who “came boldly [sailing] in their warships from the midst of the sea, none being able to withstand them” (Kitchen 1982: 40–41). Because of the Shardana's reputation as warriors, Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs hired contingents of them as mercenary troops. They were even members of Ramesses II's royal bodyguard.

Document 9.2 Merneptah's Victory Stele

This series of hymns primarily commemorates Merneptah's victory over the Libyans and their allies in his fifth regnal year. The closing poem celebrates the pharaoh's triumphs over all of Egypt's enemies, including the Asiatics he defeated in his third year. It not only mentions cities in southern Canaan (Ashkelon and Gezer) and northern Canaan (Yanoam), but also a people or tribe named *Israel*, which at that time was probably a small group located in Palestine's central hills. This is the earliest known reference to Israel in a non-biblical source. Thus, the monument has also become known as "the Israel Stele." In the following rendition of the inscription, W. Stiebing has added the explanatory material in square brackets to John A. Wilson's translation (1955a: 376–378).

Woe to Rebu [Lebu, i.e., the Libyans]! They have ceased to live (in) the pleasant fashion of one who goes about in the field. Their going *is checked* in a single day. The Tehenu [another term for Libyans] *are consumed* in a single year, for Seth has turned his back upon their chief; their settlements are abandoned *on his account*...

Great joy has arisen in Egypt;

Jubilant has gone forth in the towns of Egypt.

They talk about the victories

Which Mer-ne-Ptah Hotep-hir-Maat made in Tehenu [Libya]:

"How amiable is he, the victorious ruler!

How exalted is the king among the gods!..."

The princes are prostrate, saying: "Mercy!" [literally, *Shalom*]

Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows [traditional enemies of Egypt].

Desolation is for Tehenu; Hatti is pacified;

Plundered is the Canaan with every evil;

Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer;

Yanoam is made as that which does not exist;

Israel is laid waste, his seed is not;

Hurru [Syria and Palestine] is become a widow for Egypt!

All lands together, they are pacified;

Everyone who was restless, he has been bound

by the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Ba-en-Re Meri-Amon; the Son of Re: Mer-ne-Ptah Hotep-hir-Maat, given life like Re every day.

While the Libyans and Sea Peoples were attacking the Delta, Nubia also revolted. However, Merneptah was able to defeat the northern raiders quickly, killing about 6,000 and capturing 9,000. He then rushed southward and crushed Nubia before the revolt had become widespread. Egypt and its Empire were saved for the moment. The Nineteenth Dynasty ended with four brief conflict-filled reigns, the last being that of a queen, Tawosret, who had declared herself pharaoh. Ramesses III (c. 1187–1157 BCE), the second king of the Twentieth Dynasty, largely restored Egypt's internal stability. However, the turbulence outside the Nile valley continued unabated. Libyan warriors as well as "clans,

wives, children, and cattle” (Redford 2000: 12) again invaded the Delta in Ramesses III’s fifth and eleventh years (c. 1183 and 1176 BCE). Between these two incursions, Ramesses III had to repel a massive migration that had already progressed through Asia Minor and Syria. Inscriptions and reliefs on Ramesses III’s mortuary temple at Medinet Habu record the turmoil (Wilson 1955b; W. Stiebing added the material in brackets):

The foreign countries made a conspiracy in their islands. All at once the lands were removed and scattered in the fray. No land could stand before their arms, from Hatti, Qode [Cilicia], Carchemish, Arzawa, and Alashiya [Cyprus] on, being cut off at (one time). A camp was set up in one place in Amor [Amurru, ex coastal Syria]. They desolated its people, and its land was like that which has never come into being. They were coming forward toward Egypt, while the flame was prepared before them. Their confederation was the Philistines [actually Peleset], Tjeker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh, lands united. They laid their hands upon the land as far as the circuit of the earth, their hearts confident and trusting: “Our plans will succeed!”

The invading Sea Peoples moved in a two-pronged attack. One group occupied a fleet of ships that sailed along the coast while the other traveled overland. However, in addition to infantry and chariot warriors, the land force included ox-drawn carts containing women, children, and family possessions (see [Figure 9.6](#)). Thus, the Egyptian bas-reliefs seem to depict entire tribes of people on the move. Moreover, the texts also indicate that the force included clans, not just warriors (Redford 2000: 12).

Ramesses III defeated the Sea Peoples’ army in a battle fought somewhere in Canaan or near the borders of Egypt. However, the attacking fleet sailed on to Egypt itself. There, in one of the eastern branches of the Nile, the Egyptian navy, supported by archers firing arrows from the river banks, decimated the enemy force. Egypt was saved, but she had been severely weakened. The *Harris Papyrus*, a long record of the piety and benefactions of Ramesses III, states that the king settled the Sea Peoples as mercenaries in garrison towns of Palestine and Syria. But soon after his death, Egypt lost control over Canaan. The garrisons of Sea Peoples, perhaps supplemented by more recent arrivals, gained control of Dor and other coastal sites.

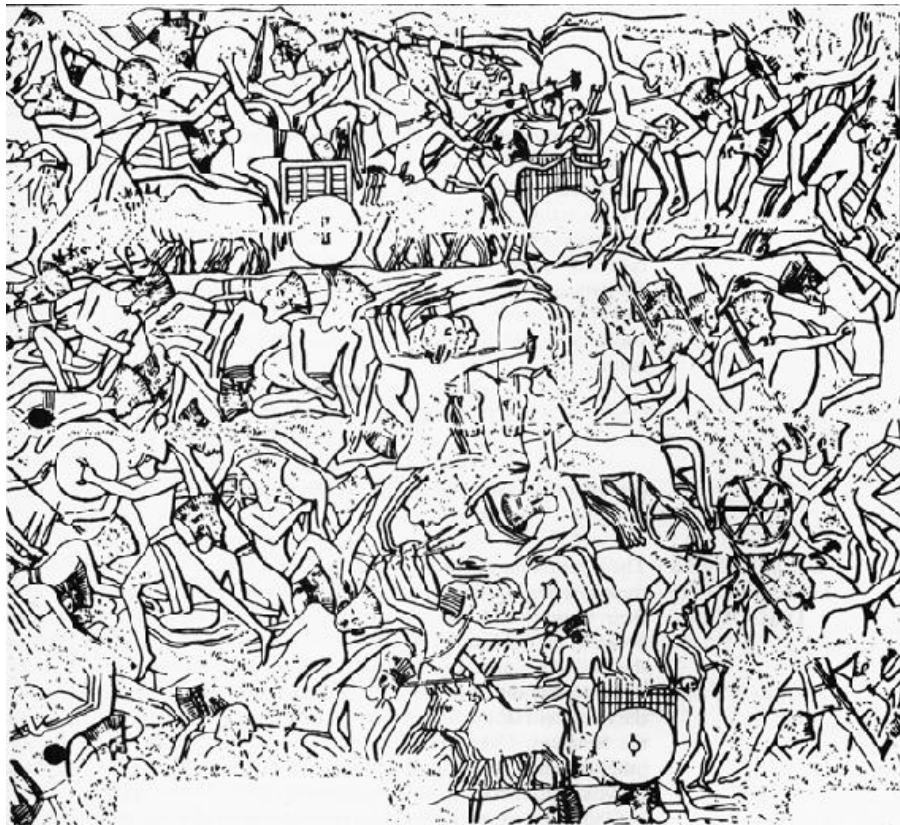


Figure 9.6 The Land Battle against the Sea Peoples

This is a line drawing of a relief on Ramesses III's mortuary temple at Medinet Habu depicting his victory over the "Peoples of the Sea." Note the oxcarts carrying women and children, indicating a migration rather than just an invasion.

© Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Who were these mysterious Sea Peoples and where did they come from? Of the many groups mentioned in Egyptian texts—Akawasha, Denyen, Lukka, Peleset, Shardana, Shekelesh, Tjekker, Tursha, and Weshesh—only two can be identified with a high degree of probability. It is generally agreed that the Peleset almost certainly were the Philistines (Hebrew *Pelishtim*) mentioned frequently in the Bible, and that the Lukka were the inhabitants of Classical Lycia. Both of these groups have connections with the Aegean area.

The Aegean origin of the Philistines is also echoed in the Bible. Biblical tradition (Deuteronomy 2:33; Jeremiah 47:4; Amos 9:7) claimed that the Philistines came to Canaan from Caphtor or Kaphtor, the place called Kaptaru in Akkadian texts and Keftiu in Egyptian ones (Knapp 1995: 1438–1439; Machinist 2000). The Egyptians described Keftiu as a place "in the midst of the Great Green" (the Mediterranean Sea) and depicted its people wearing

Minoan-Mycenaean-style costumes and carrying Minoan-Mycenaean types of objects. So, Keftiu/Kaphtor probably was the ancient Near Eastern name for Crete or the Minoan-Mycenaean culture area in general (the Aegean region). The non-Semitic names of two out of five local kings in a recently discovered inscription from Ekron and the extremely few Philistine words preserved in the Bible also provide some support for the biblical tradition that the Philistines came from outside of Palestine and, specifically, from the Aegean area.

Moreover, archaeologists have traced much of the Philistine material culture to the Aegean. They have shown that many of the characteristic types of pottery found in twelfth-century strata of Philistine cities in Palestine developed from Mycenaean prototypes (the style known as Late Helladic IIIC:1b) even though it was produced locally. Thus, potters with Aegean traditions must have produced the Philistine pottery in Palestine (Dothan 1982: 94–160, 198–215; Dothan and Dothan 1992: 89–92; Killebrew 2000). While the Mycenaean influence is predominant, some Philistine pottery types reflect Cypriot styles, suggesting a connection with that island as well (Dothan 1982: 160–198). So the evidence seems to support Trude Dothan’s conclusion that Philistine pottery “was not the product of a people coming directly from their country of origin with a homogeneous tradition but rather reflects the cultural influences picked up along the way in the long, slow, meandering migration from their Aegean homeland” (1982: 217).

The Lukka were also from the Aegean area, but they were not Mycenaean. We have seen that some of them were known as seafaring pirates at the time of Akhenaton. They also were Hittite subject-allies who were part of the Hittite army that fought Ramesses II at Qadesh (c. 1275 BCE). Hittite and Ugaritic sources indicate that the Lukka lands probably were located in southwestern or southern Asia Minor (see [Map 9.1](#)). The south-southwestern corner of Asia Minor was still called Lycia (*Lukia* in Greek) in Classical times. Furthermore, the language spoken in Classical Lycia was related to the Luwian tongue spoken in the area during the Bronze Age.

It is likely that the other Sea Peoples mentioned in the Egyptian accounts also came largely from the eastern Aegean region and coastal Asia Minor, for their apparel and ships are of Aegean type.³ There have been many suggestions about the identities of other groups of sea peoples: for example, the Akawasha = Hittite Ahhiyawans and Homer’s Achaeans (*Achaiwoi*); the Denyen (or Danuna) = the Danaans (*Danaoi*), a synonym for “Achaeans” in the *Iliad*; the Tursha may be from Taruisa (or Taruisha), a place located in western Asia Minor that is probably Troy, or they are the *Tyrsenoi* (the ancient Greek name for the early Etruscans); the Shardana = Sardinians and Shekelesh = Sicilians (*Sikeloi*); and so on (see Barnett 1975: 367; Sandars 1985: 106–113, 158, 161–165,

170, 199–201; Singer 1988: 239–250, 1992; Bryce 2005: 338–9; Drews 2000: 177–182). All of these possible identifications, however, are questionable. None is as probable as the equation of the Peleset with the Philistines and the Lukka with the Lycians.

The Collapse of Bronze Age Societies in the Eastern Mediterranean

Debating the Evidence: The Historicity of the Trojan War

Since ancient times, scholars have been arguing about the historicity of the Trojan War described in legends and immortalized in the Greek poet Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad* (probably composed c. 750–700 BCE).⁴ Heinrich Schliemann's late nineteenth-century CE excavations at Hissarlik in Turkey uncovered a Bronze Age city where Troy was supposedly located. Today, most scholars agree that Troy was a real place and that Hissarlik represents its remains (Latacz 2004: 17–100). But what of the events that supposedly took place there? When the Hittite archives were discovered and deciphered, they included surprising references to this region, and many scholars hoped that these texts would provide the final answers about Troy (see Thomas and Conant 2005: 136–144). However, they have simply furnished more fuel to keep the arguments raging.

Early New Kingdom Hittite sources mention two places of interest here, one called Wilusiya (Wilusa in later texts) and the other, Taruisa. These places seem to have been near one another or related in some way. Many scholars have argued that these names were the Hittite versions of Ilios (Wilios in early Greek) and Troia, Homeric terms for Troy. Though some dispute these parallels, their likelihood has been strengthened by evidence that Wilusa was located north of the Seha River Land (Latacz 2004: 82–90; Bryce 2005: 360–361). This information locates Wilusa in the general area of the Troad, the peninsula where Greek tradition placed Troy. Perhaps it is also noteworthy that Egyptian lists of the Hittite allies at the Battle of Qadesh include the Dardany. These might be the *Dardanoi* (Dardanians), a Homeric name for inhabitants of the Troad.

There are other possible connections between the Hittite texts and Greek tradition. The Hittite king Muwatalli II (c. 1295–1272 BCE) made a treaty with a

king of Wilusa named Alaksandus. This name is clearly similar to Alexandros (Alexander), another name for Paris, Homer's Trojan prince. Furthermore, over a span of about two centuries, the Hittites were in contact with a kingdom called Ahhiyawa (or Ahhiya in the earliest texts). This kingdom was sometimes a Hittite friend and at other times a foe, but it was never under Hittite control. An early text mentions conflicts with Attarsiyas or Attarissiyas, "the man of Ahhiya," that take place within western Anatolia and Alasiya (probably Cyprus). Later texts state that Ahhiyawa had at least nominal control of Milawata (also known as Millawanda) and was harboring a fugitive who had stirred up trouble in western Asia Minor. The evidence indicates that Ahhiyawa was a sea power and was strong enough for one Hittite scribe to consider its ruler a "Great King" similar to those of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and Hatti (Castleden 2005: 208–210). However, its location is unknown. Most scholars now agree that the people of Ahhiya or Ahhiyawa are Mycenaean Greeks, the Homeric *Achaioi* (originally *Achaiwoi*) or Achaeans (Gurney 1990: 38–45; Bryce 2005: 57–8; Latacz 2004: 120–126; Thomas and Conant 2005: 16–17). Some go further and claim that Attarsiyas represents Atreus, the name of an early king of Mycenae. However, this view has also been strongly opposed on philo-logical grounds (Güterbock 1984).

Those who staunchly believe in the historical accuracy of the early Greek traditions argue that Ahhiyawa was southern Greece with its capital at Mycenae (e.g., Wood 1985: 178–185; Latacz 2004: 133–134; Castleden 2005: 208–210). Others place it in Cyprus or western Asia Minor. Still others think Ahhiyawa probably was a Mycenaean kingdom based on Rhodes or another Aegean island with control over most of the eastern Aegean islands (e.g., Knapp 1995: 1443). Occasionally, it also dominated parts of Asia Minor's western coast, particularly Milawata which probably was the city of Miletus, where Mycenaean remains have been found (Latacz 2004: 86; Thomas and Conant 2005: 16–17). However, though the Hittite documents provide enough evidence to sketch out a rudimentary outline of thirteenth-century events in Wilusa and Milawata, they provide no evidence of the characters and events memorialized in the Greek stories of the Trojan War. "All of this is of course most unsatisfying if one is looking for substantial evidence of a conflict between a confederacy of Mycenaean states and Troy and its allies" (Thomas and Conant 2005: 37).

Equally inconclusive is the archaeology of the city of Troy itself. At Hissarlik, excavated over the last century and a half, archaeologists have uncovered an important fortified stronghold on the Dardanelles that was occupied off and on from c. 3000 BCE to 600 CE. The finest and largest of the cities was that of level VI that had massive fortification walls around its citadel. Troy VI also had a large lower city that seems to have been surrounded

by a deep ditch. The city (Troy VIh) was heavily damaged around c. 1300–1250 BCE, probably due to an earthquake. However, it was soon rebuilt (Level VIIa) and stood for nearly a century before being destroyed by fire around 1200–1150 BCE. The site was reoccupied, though on a much smaller and less grandiose scale (Troy VIIb) before being destroyed again c. 1100 BCE. At one time or another various scholars have claimed that Troy VIh, Troy VIIa, or Troy VIIb was the Troy of Homer's saga, with Troy VIIa as the most popular candidate. Unfortunately, archaeology does not indicate who was responsible for any of the destructions (Cline 2013: Part III).

So, is the Trojan War historical or not? Particularly revealing are the Hittite texts that point to intermittent conflicts between Mycenaeans and places along the coast of Asia Minor, including Troy. Some parts of the Homeric poems accurately reflect the Late Bronze Age during which the Trojan War supposedly occurred (Strauss 2006: 1–11; Yamauchi 2007). However, evidence from archaeology and the Mycenaean Linear B texts show that the epics mix material from early and late parts of the Late Bronze Age and the “Dark Age” (the era with virtually no surviving written records) that followed (Chadwick 1976: 180–186; Thomas 1998; Thomas and Conant 2005: 55–58; Schofield 2007: 191–192; Cline 2013: pt. II, chap. 3). As Trevor Bryce pointed out (2005: 369), “These inconsistencies support the notion of a dynamic oral tradition, in which details can readily be adapted to accord with contemporary fashions, practices, and beliefs.” Generations of poets not only passed on early traditions about these conflicts, they also modified, blended, embellished, and romanticized them (Bryce 2005: 370–371; Thomas and Conant 2005: 58–60). Through this process, early ballads about the battles between groups of Achaeans, Hittites, and Trojans described in the Hittite texts may have developed into the Trojan War traditions, some of which varied from Homer's version (Castleden 2005: 200–201, 217). The final results of this development, the Homeric epics, are wonderful poetic literature, but they are not history in the modern sense of the word.

The Mycenaean Kingdoms

During the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries BCE, Greek-speaking Mycenaeans, primarily settled in southern Greece, dominated the Aegean world. As mentioned in [Chapter 8](#), around 1435 BCE or shortly thereafter, Mycenaean groups invaded Crete, destroyed the Minoan palaces, and took control of the island. The descendants of these invaders continued to rule Crete from Knossos into the thirteenth century BCE. We have noted that there were also

Mycenaean settlements on Rhodes and at Miletus in Asia Minor, possibly ruled by the king of Ahhiyawa referred to in Hittite texts.

Trade flourished during the thirteenth century BCE, and Mycenaean products, primarily perfumed oils, were in great demand throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Beautiful palaces whose architecture, frescoes, and pottery exhibit Minoan influences dotted southern Greece, and their rulers controlled the local economies. However, peace did not always accompany prosperity in the Aegean region. A few palaces, like the ones at Pylos and Knossos, were defended only by geography or by outlying forts, but most royal dwellings and administrative centers were enclosed within strongly fortified citadels. The rulers of Gla, Athens, Tiryns, and Mycenae found it necessary to enlarge or strengthen their fortification walls during the thirteenth century, and around the middle of the century, the palace at Thebes in Boeotia was burned. The Mycenaean palace at Knossos in Crete probably was destroyed about the same time.⁵

Then came the widespread disasters of the latter thirteenth and early twelfth centuries BCE. Around 1230 BCE, Pylos was destroyed. Soon afterward, Thebes was burned again, along with Gla, Iolkos, and Tiryns. Portions of Mycenae were burned at least once and possibly twice during the early twelfth century BCE, but this great citadel survived. Then, around 1150 BCE, Mycenae, too, was razed and abandoned. Population shifts were immense, with refugees settling in Attica, Achaea, the Ionian Islands (especially the island of Cephalonia) off the west coast of Greece, and the far-off island of Cyprus. Meanwhile, areas of Thessaly, Boeotia, and parts of the Peloponnese, which formerly had contained many settlements, became seriously depopulated for about a century. Estimates for the total population of Greece show a decline of nearly 75 percent in the twelfth century BCE. The areas that continued to be settled experienced a marked decline in material culture, and the cultural unity of the Mycenaean Age came to an end. The highly centralized Mycenaean palaces with their elaborate bureaucracies disappeared, and with them went writing, luxury goods, and international trade. Small, poor agricultural villages took their place.

The situation was somewhat the same in Crete, where there was a great decline in population, and the material culture became much poorer. People abandoned the previously well-populated coastal areas (especially in South Crete) and built new villages in the hills or in other easily defensible positions. For a time, Linear B continued to be used at Khania (Chania), suggesting some continuation of the palace system and bureaucracy. However, eventually the regional decline took its toll and knowledge of writing was lost in Crete as it had been in Greece. A non-literary “Dark Age” descended over the entire Aegean region.

The Demise of the Hittite Empire

The Hittite Empire, the dominant power in the Near East during most of the thirteenth century BCE, suddenly collapsed just after 1200 BCE. Only a few texts survive from the reign of Suppiluliuma II, the last Hittite king. However, they make several general references to instability at this time. The state seemed to be suffering from food shortages. Merneptah had sent them several shiploads of grain around 1213 BCE. Then, about a generation later, among the letters received by the king of Ugarit before his city's destruction were three mentioning famine in Hatti. One demanded that Ugarit furnish a ship to transport 2,000 measures of grain to Cilicia immediately. It is, the letter says, a matter of life or death! (Astour 1965).⁶

Meanwhile, Hittite vassals in western Anatolia and elsewhere rebelled. One inscription records "victories" over the Lukka lands and a formerly allied territory in the south, Tarhuntassa. As we have seen, Egyptian records claim that the Sea Peoples also moved through Asia Minor at this time. The Hittites raised an army and navy from their citizens and faithful vassals and deployed them to meet these threats in the south. However, this move left vassals like the kings of Alasiya (probably Cyprus) and Ugarit virtually defenseless. Ammurapi, the last king of Ugarit, answered an appeal for help from the king of Alasiya:

My father, behold, the enemy's ships came (here); my cities(?) were burned, and they did evil things in my country. Does not my father know that all my troops and chariots(?) are in the Hittite country, and all my ships are in the land of Lycia [Lukka]?... Thus, the country is abandoned to itself. May my father know it: the seven ships of the enemy that came here inflicted much damage upon us.

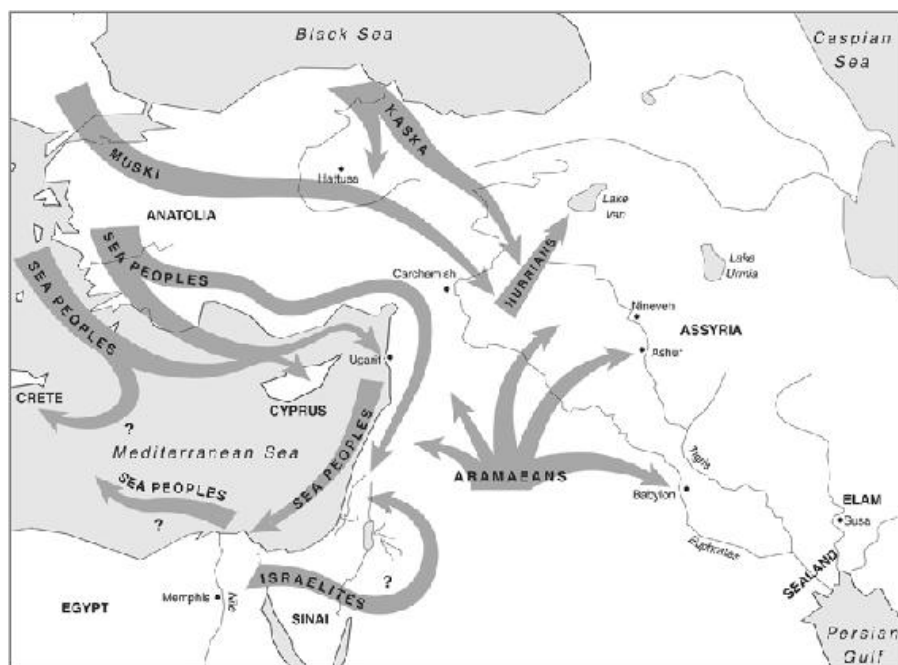
(Astour 1965: 255; Bryce 2003: 228)

Then he asks his fellow king to inform him if any other ships of the enemy appear.

Whether the ships attacking Cyprus and coastal Syria were opportunistic local pirates or contingents of the Sea Peoples is unknown. Early in the twelfth century BCE, the Hittite and Ugaritic records became silent. So we also have no information about what happened to the Hittite army and navy to which Ugarit had committed its troops and ships. It is highly probable that the Hittite forces were defeated, for a wave of destruction swept over the Hittite Empire. Hattusa was largely abandoned, its temples and palaces swept clean and then burned. Other cities, such as Troy, Miletus, Alaca Höyük, Alişar, Tarsus, Alalakh, Ugarit, Qatna, Qadesh, and most other cities of the empire were destroyed within decades of each other in the early twelfth century BCE. Many were never occupied again. The Egyptians claimed that Carchemish was also

destroyed, but it seems to have been one of the few cities that managed to survive the crisis relatively intact. Also, contrary to the Medinet Habu inscription, there is little evidence for the presence of foreign invaders at Hattusa or elsewhere on the Anatolian plateau.

The Hittite Empire was gone, but Hittite culture did not totally disappear. In Syria during the twelfth century BCE, several small kingdoms arose (one of which was Carchemish) whose rulers were direct descendants of the Hittite royal line and whose religious, artistic, and epigraphic traditions derived from those of the Hittite Empire. The Assyrians called these kingdoms “Hatti,” the old name for the Hittite Empire. However, the language of these “Neo-Hittites” was not the Hittite of the former rulers of Hattusa. It was Luwian, the spoken language of much of Anatolia in the Bronze Age. It is likely that Luwian speakers from Hatti and its former territories migrated to Syria during the upheavals of the early twelfth century BCE. The admixture of local Semitic populations with Hittite and Luwian elements became the defining feature of the newly formed kingdoms of southern Anatolia and northern Syria.



Map 9.2 Migrations at the End of the Bronze Age (c. 1200–1100 BCE)

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Meanwhile, migrations were taking place elsewhere within Asia Minor (see [Map 9.2](#)). The Kaska people who had long lived on the southern shore of the Black Sea north of Hatti probably moved southward into the old Hittite

heartland. Later Luwian inscriptions from Tabal, the former Hittite Lower Land, indicate that people called the Kasku (almost certainly descendants of the Kaska) were settled in what previously had been Hatti. A Kaska army even penetrated into northern Syria during the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I (c. 1115–1077 BCE). Many scholars think it likely that the Kaska, not the Sea Peoples, destroyed Hattusa (as they had at times in the past) and then occupied the surrounding territory.

Another group, known as the Mushki, also migrated through Anatolia in the twelfth century. Like the Kaska, the Mushki got as far as northern Syria before the Assyrians drove them back. Some think they allied themselves with the Kaska and participated in the destruction of Hattusa and Hatti. Possibly the Mushki were the people the Greeks called Mysians, who legend says entered Asia Minor from Thrace with another group known as the Phrygians. The Mushki seem to have settled eventually in west-central Anatolia, where they probably amalgamated with the Phrygians by the eighth century BCE.

The End of Egyptian Power

The Egyptian vassal states in Syria and Palestine also experienced devastation and destruction, probably due mostly to the Sea Peoples' invasion. Important urban sites such as Ugarit, Hazor, and Ashkelon were destroyed in the twelfth century. Ugarit did not recover, but Hazor and Ashkelon show new cultural features when they are resettled. However, Egypt itself weathered the twelfth-century BCE tumult better than most other areas of the eastern Mediterranean. The fabric of Egyptian society and civilization remained essentially intact, in contrast to the almost total collapse that occurred in Mycenaean and Hittite lands. Egypt also successfully prevented groups of Libyans and Sea Peoples from occupying the Nile Delta. However, not even Egypt could maintain her former strength and grandeur in the face of the widespread calamities. Egyptian control over Canaan came to an end around the middle of the twelfth century, and there are indications of hardship and trouble within the Nile valley itself during this era.

From the time of Ramesses III (c. 1187–1157 BCE) through that of Ramesses VII (c. 1138–1131 BCE), the price of emmer wheat in Egypt gradually rose to a level eight times (and for a while, twenty-four times) higher than its earlier rate. It remained at a high level for the rest of the century (Černý 1933–1934; Janssen 1975: 551–552). Only in the time of Ramesses X (c. 1110–1107 BCE) did the price drop, but even then it remained twice what it was at the beginning of the twelfth century BCE. During this period, the government also sometimes

failed to pay the generous grain and other food rations owed to the elite artisans who cut and decorated the royal tombs. The craftsmen staged strikes at least six times between Ramesses III's twenty-ninth regnal year (c. 1159 BCE) and the third year of Ramesses X (c. 1108 BCE) because their grain allotments were months in arrears.

Grain shortages and inflation also encouraged other evils. Corruption among public officials was rampant. Royal tombs were robbed, often by the very craftsmen who had worked on them. During the reign of Ramesses IX (c. 1129–1111 BCE), eight tomb robbers were caught and forced to confess. Obviously, they had many accomplices—necropolis police, priests, boatmen, merchants, various officials, and perhaps even the mayor of Western Thebes himself. However, no high officials were ever brought to justice. It is interesting that the item the thieves most often purchased with their loot was food. Another large share went as bribes to granary guards and officials so that the thieves could obtain grain in the future (Peet 1930; Romer 1984: 145–162).

Banditry and civil war also destabilized society. Several times during the latter half of the twelfth century BCE, marauding groups of Egyptians and Libyan mercenaries terrorized the area around Thebes, looting and killing. On one occasion they destroyed an entire town. Anarchy broke out in Thebes, and looters stripped the gold and copper from the walls, doors, and statues of the city's temples. By the time Ramesses XI died and the Twentieth Dynasty ended (c. 1077 BCE), Upper Egypt was being ruled by an army commander of Libyan descent. In the Delta, another Libyan general, Nesbanebdjed (called Smendes in Greek), who had at least given lip service to Ramesses XI, proclaimed himself king when Ramesses died. Once more Upper and Lower Egypt were essentially independent entities, though their rulers were allies tied to one another by background and marriage. The two lands would not be reunited under native Egyptian rule until modern times. The Egyptian New Kingdom, the era of Egyptian greatness, was over.

The Decline of Assyria and Babylonia

During the late fourteenth and early thirteenth centuries BCE, Assyria had grown into a major power. Ashur-Uballit I (c. 1353–1313 BCE) established Assyria's independence from Kassite Babylonia, claimed the status of a "Great King," and initiated correspondence with Egypt. Then under Adad-Nirari I (c. 1295–1264 BCE) and Shalmaneser I (c. 1263–1234 BCE), Assyria had advanced her power into eastern Syria. Shalmaneser's successor, Tukulti-Ninurta I (c. 1233–1197 BCE), not only extended Assyrian territory northward at the

expense of the Hittites, but he finally succeeded in conquering Babylon and making it an Assyrian vassal. By the time he died, Assyria controlled all of Mesopotamia, including the portion of Syria east of the Euphrates River.

Two law codes from this time, the Middle Assyrian Laws and the Palace Decrees, give a sense of life under Assyrian rule. They are most notable for the strict restrictions on women's lives (especially palace women) and the severe punishments for transgressors (Van De Mieroop 2016: 195). For example, married women had to cover their heads in public, and any man caught talking privately with a palace woman would be killed.

Assyria's dominance did not last long. Tukulti-Ninurta was murdered by one of his sons and the Assyrian Empire went into a swift decline. Babylon reestablished its independence, and Assyria seems to have lost much of her Syrian territory. Emar, a city on the Euphrates River, suffered "staggering grain prices" before being destroyed around 1185 BCE by unknown raiders probably "driven by the general famine" (Singer 2000: 24–25). Semimadic Aramaean tribes began occupying parts of Syria and occasionally launched raids into Mesopotamia, as well (see [Map 9.2](#)). Mushki and Kaska groups from Asia Minor also invaded Assyrian territory. Tiglath-pileser I (c. 1115–1077 BCE) arrested the decline for a time, marching all the way to the Mediterranean on one expedition and north of Lake Van on another. However, most of his campaigns seem to have been essentially defensive in nature. Twenty-eight times during his reign he had to defeat invading Aramaeans or launch preemptive strikes into their territory. Some of the Aramaean attacks reached far into the Assyrian heartland, destroying small towns and villages and adding to hardships produced by nature. An Assyrian letter from this time complains about "rains which have been so scanty this year that no harvests were reaped" (Neumann and Parpola 1987: 178; see also Wiseman 1975: 465). Just a few years later, an Assyrian chronicle records that "a famine (so severe) occurred (that) [peop]le ate one another's flesh" (Neumann and Parpola 1987: 178).

Despite the heroic efforts of Tiglath-pileser I and Ashurnasirpal I (c. 1049–1031 BCE), Assyrian territory continued to contract. By the end of the eleventh century BCE, Assyrian rulers were able to control only the territory from Ashur in the south to Nineveh in the north and from just west of the Tigris River to Arbil in the east. Other problems also continued into the tenth century BCE. Drought, famine, and hunger are mentioned at least fourteen times in texts dating from the eleventh and first half of the tenth centuries BCE. At the end of the eleventh century BCE, the situation was so bad that food and drink offerings for many of the gods had to be canceled. Considering the importance that ancient Near Eastern peoples placed on maintaining the rites of their gods, especially when divine help was needed, this act could only have been

prompted by an extreme emergency.

Rival Babylon was unable to take advantage of this period of Assyrian weakness, for she, too, was beset with problems. Elam, the kingdom just to the east, began sending her armies into Baby-lonia after Tukulti-Ninurta I of Assyria put his puppet king on Babylon's throne. The Elamites fought to prevent Assyrian domination of lower Mesopotamia, often destroying Babylonian towns in the process. In 1158 the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte, son-in-law of the Babylonian king Melishipak, invaded Babylonia and sacked its cities, including Babylon. Shutruk-Nahhunte, in an act of cultural desecration or usurpation, carried off many Mesopotamian monuments to his capital Susa, including Naram-Sin's victory stele and Hammurabi's law stele. There, French archaeologists found them in the mid-nineteenth century CE. The Elamite attacks destroyed the Kassite Dynasty in Babylon, bringing to a close more than 400 years of Kassite rule. Soon after, a new dynasty from Isin took the throne of Babylon. One of its kings, Nebuchadnezzar I, was later lauded for his attacks on Susa and his return of the statue of Marduk to Babylon.

From about 1100 BCE on, Aramaean groups also raided into Mesopotamia (and possibly Elam), increasing the devastation and turmoil. The political chaos was accompanied by severe food shortages. The normal price of barley in Mesopotamia had been about one silver shekel for thirty *seahs* (approximately two bushels). However, in the eleventh and early tenth centuries BCE, grain usually fetched two to four times that normal price. The inflationary peak seems to have been reached in the mid-tenth century BCE, when an inscription records that in Babylon, a gold shekel purchased only two *seahs* of barley (Neumann and Parpola 1987: 181). One gold shekel was usually worth ten silver ones. So, this text indicates that grain was selling for 150 times its normal price. Obviously, the food shortages in Mesopotamia were even worse than those in Egypt.

As one might expect, the area's population seriously declined during this period. After Nebuchadnezzar's sack of Susa, many Elamite towns were abandoned around 1100 BCE or soon afterward, and those still occupied decreased in size. In Mesopotamia, archaeological surveys indicate that in the old Sumerian heartland just north of the Persian Gulf, the population declined by about 25 percent during this era. However, in central Mesopotamia, the area surrounding Babylon proper, the population loss seems to have been about 75 percent (Brink-man 1984). This may have been due to the shifting course of the Euphrates which moved westward at this time and left some urban centers high and dry.

Babylonia's turmoil and calamities from the twelfth through tenth centuries BCE probably are reflected in the *Epic of Erra* (Foster 1993: Vol 2, 771–801) written to celebrate the later return to normalcy. In this poetic composition,

Marduk abandons Babylon and Erra, the god of pestilence, war, and the underworld, gains control. He proceeds to destroy the people—just and unjust, strong and weak alike—through fighting, plague, famine, lack of water, and natural disasters. Pleased with the devastation he has wrought, Erra reflects how his actions have eliminated all national and social cohesion and bred a “dog eat dog” sense of desperation:

Sealand [the area at the head of the Persian Gulf] shall not spare Sealand,... nor Assyrian
Assyrian,
Nor shall Elamite spare Elamite, nor Kassite Kassite,...
Nor country country, nor city city,
Nor shall tribe spare tribe, nor man man, nor brother brother, and they shall slay one
another.

(Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 1, 380)

Debating the Evidence: What Caused the Collapse?

What could have brought about such widespread devastation and chaos throughout the eastern Mediterranean area? Why, after a long period of stability, did Bronze Age civilization collapse? It used to be common to blame destructive invasions by less-civilized outsiders—Dorians in Greece, the Sea Peoples in Asia Minor and Syria, and Philistines and Israelites in Canaan. These were supported by the great epics of the ancient world, the Hebrew Bible and the Homeric epics. However, archaeology and linguistics have provided evidence that invading Dorians did *not* destroy Mycenaean civilization (Hooker 1977: 144–147, 170–173, 1999: 30–31; Stiebing 1980). They did not settle in the Peloponnese and Crete until a few generations *after* the Mycenaean collapse. There are also serious doubts about the Sea Peoples’ role in the destruction of the Hittite Empire and about an Israelite invasion of Canaan (as we shall see in [Chapter 13](#)). Furthermore, the established kingdoms had fortified citadels and experienced defenders. They were used to fighting well-trained armies. So why did they now fall so easily to less organized groups of invaders? The various invasions and population movements seem to have been *symptoms* of the widespread political, economic, and cultural collapse, rather than its primary cause.

Robert Drews has proposed an interesting variation of the invasion explanation that sees changes in warfare as the reason for the end of the Bronze Age. According to this view, barbarians like the Sea Peoples, who had long been employed as mercenaries by the Great Powers, abruptly turned on their masters. They had recognized that massed infantry soldiers armed with

long slashing swords and javelins were superior to the chariot forces upon which the major empires relied (Drews 1993: 97, 209–225). His theory is problematic, however, in that it underestimates the role of the infantry in the Bronze Age as well as the continued effectiveness of chariots in the early part of the Iron Age. Infantry represented the bulk of both the Egyptian and Hittite forces that fought at Qadesh, not all of them mercenaries. Drews's theory also eliminates major ethnic migrations in connection with the catastrophe. He argues, for example, that the Sea Peoples were only looting gangs of warriors, not whole tribes or populations on the move. The conflict depicted at Medinet Habu supposedly reflects a minor Egyptian campaign into the Levant, with refugees fleeing in ox carts (Drews 2000). Drews's arguments have not won wide support, for there is mounting evidence for east Aegean migrations at the end of the Bronze Age.

Other scholars have blamed earthquakes for the destructions at Knossos, Mycenae, Tiryns, Midea, Troy, and other sites (Zangger 1992: 82–85; Drews 1993: 33–37; Nur and Cline 2000, 2001; Cline 2014: 128–132). But earthquakes are usually localized, so most scholars have rejected them as causes of most of the disasters. As Trevor Bryce remarks (2005: 341), “there is little or no demonstrable archaeological evidence of earthquake activity, at least on such a scale as to have caused the total destruction and abandonment of a site.” There has been much wider support for the idea that a severe drought provoked the crisis (e.g., Carpenter 1966; Bryson et al. 1974; Stiebing 1980, 1989: 182–187, 1994; Weiss 1982; Neumann and Parpola 1987; Gorny 1989; Betancourt 2000: 300–301). Much of the agricultural land in the eastern Mediterranean is marginal at best. Even a small change in rainfall amounts can have a major impact, even in the volume of water carried by the rivers. Thus, the soaring prices for grain in Egypt and Mesopotamia and the Hittite appeals for grain have been used to support the drought hypothesis. Also, studies of paleoenvironmental data for the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates indicate that they were at very low levels during the twelfth century BCE (Butzer 1976: 30–33; Kay and Johnson 1981: 251–253). Moreover, studies of tree-ring sequences show that there was a climatic change in the Northern Hemisphere between 1300 and 1000 BCE (Lamb 1982; Baillie 1988a, 1988b), and a tree-ring sequence from Gordion in Asia Minor indicates a period of very dry weather there c. 1200 to 1150 BCE. That was about the time that the Hittites appealed to Egypt for grain to alleviate famine. This evidence is bolstered by recent analyses of pollen samples from Cyprus and Syria (Kaniewski et al. 2013), as well as the bottom of the Sea of Galilee (Langgut et al. 2013), that also indicate a severe drought from about 1200 to 1000 BCE coincides with the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age.

Obviously, food shortages due to an extended drought or sequences of

several dry years occurring at close intervals could have led to discontent, increased piracy, revolts, conflicts, and population movements like those of the twelfth century. Such conflicts and movements, once begun, would have had a multiplier or domino effect on other areas. However, it has been objected that there simply is no evidence of a drought long enough and intense enough to cause the collapse. Pollen evidence from Greece shows no sign of extreme drought, and the texts at Pylos in Greece produced just before its destruction give no indication of food shortages or famine. The food shortages mentioned in Near Eastern texts and the inflationary prices for grain could have been *effects* of disorder and social collapse rather than their cause. Also, some of the Greek palaces still had stores of wheat, barley, and other foodstuffs in their storerooms when they were burned. So, it is claimed, their attackers do not seem to have been seeking food (Drews 1993: 82–84; Castleden 2005: 180). (It should be noted, though, that there is no way to determine how the fires at these sites started or by whom, attackers or defenders.)

Finally, some scholars have argued that the Bronze Age civilizations experienced a systems collapse. Their economies were too narrowly based and their trade networks depended on relatively peaceful conditions. Also, there were major social problems (such as debt slavery, alienation of land, abuse of peasants by the ruling aristocracy) that caused internal discontent. Then, at the end of the thirteenth century BCE, piracy and military conflicts disrupted trade. The substantial decline of trade, in turn, led to economic collapse, revolts, and a general breakdown of the economic, political, and social systems (e.g., Betancourt 1976; Sandars 1985: 47–49, 77–79; Zaccagnini 1990; Dickinson 1994: 307–309). This theory helps to explain why the Bronze Age societies could not recover after the catastrophes of the twelfth century BCE. However, once more, it seems to confuse symptoms of the collapse with causes. Why did piracy increase and trade decline at the end of the Bronze Age? What made the conflicts around 1200 BCE different from those that had frequently taken place earlier? And why did social inequities that had existed throughout the Bronze Age suddenly lead to revolutions?

As Rodney Castleden (2005: 181–182) and Eric Cline (2014: 139–170) have observed, no one explanation for the collapse will work. Cline blames what he calls a “perfect storm” of calamities over a number of years for ending the Bronze Age civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean. Devastating earthquakes may have destroyed some sites, while drought and famine brought about the end of others. Inflation, piracy, loss of trade, population movements, internal revolts, and warfare also played a part as results of catastrophes in some areas and causes of collapse in others.

Based on the evidence presently available, therefore, we may be seeing the result of a

systems collapse that was caused by a series of events linked together via a “multiplier effect,” in which one factor affected the others, thereby magnifying the effects of each.

(Cline 2014: 165)

Eastern Mediterranean civilizations had survived earthquakes, drought, piracy, and other calamities individually in the past, but they could not withstand the host of interrelated disasters that occurred at the end of the Bronze Age. When relative calm returned to the region after c. 1100 BCE, a new world had dawned. The old empires were gone or reduced to impotence. In their place there developed new states and new societies ready to make their mark on the pages of history.

Notes

1. As Hittite sources generally do not record reign lengths for Hittite kings, dates are dependent on correlations with Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings. For a discussion of the problems of New Kingdom Hittite chronology see Kuhrt (1995: Vol. 1, 339–231) and Bryce (2005: 375–382). The spelling of Hittite names in this work is also that of Bryce. Some Hittitologists use “sh” rather than “s” in English versions of Hittite names (e.g., Shuppiliuma, Hattusha, Murshili), and a few use “kh” instead of “h” (e.g., Khattushili, Khatti, Khattusha).
2. The Roman statesman Cicero bestowed the accolade, “Father of History,” on the Greek historian Herodotus. Of course, Cicero knew nothing of the earlier historical writings of the Hittites and the Israelites.
3. The Egyptians’ depict the Sea Peoples’ attire as similar to that of the Keftiu, and the attire of both is similar to the clothing worn by males shown in Mycenaean frescoes. For the Aegean origin of the Sea Peoples’ bird-headed ships, see Wachsmann (2000).
4. Scholars continue to disagree about the authorship and date of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Were these epic poems created by a single bard named Homer? Was the author a man or a woman? Where were they composed and when? See Cline (2013: Part II, Chap. 3), “Homeric Questions.”
5. The final destruction of Knossos traditionally has been dated c. 1400–1380 BCE, the date given by Sir Arthur Evans. However, a review of the evidence (Hallager 1977) has indicated that the palace probably continued to exist well into the thirteenth century BCE. Exactly when in the thirteenth century the palace was destroyed is uncertain.
6. For an interpretation of this letter that differs from that of Astour, see Hoffner (1992: 49).

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The Early Iron Age—Recovery and Transformation (c. 1100–745 BCE)

The destruction of Hatti and the weakening of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia at the end of the Bronze Age allowed many independent small states to arise in territory once controlled by these empires. From the twelfth through the mid-ninth centuries BCE, an era known as the Early Iron Age, these small kingdoms flourished before the rising power of Assyria began to threaten many of them once more. In many ways, this period is characterized as a dark period, for there are relatively few written records from this time. Instead, it is a period of transition and reorganization between the era of prosperous and powerful states and empires of the Late Bronze Age and the floruit of Assyria and Babylonia. However, the citizens of the Early Iron Age made numerous important cultural contributions to later civilization, such as the alphabet and its spread by the Phoenicians, the transition to the use of iron as a metal, and the domestication of camels for use in long-distance trade. Another significant development was the emergence of the Israelites and their subsequent creation of the religious foundation of later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, because of the significance of biblical tradition in Western civilization, the history of Israel will be discussed separately in [Chapter 13](#).

Egypt and Mesopotamia

The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt

Though Ramesses III had effectively turned back invasions of the Libyans and Sea People, his successors were beset with economic and social difficulties which led to the fracturing of the Egyptian monarchy. As we have seen ([Chapter 9](#)), Egypt in the twelfth century was plagued by low Nile levels,

drought, and corruption. The last ruler of the Twentieth Dynasty, Ramses XI, was so weak that he effectively lost control of Upper Egypt to the priests of Amun. At his death, a governor of the Delta, Nesbanebdjed (known to the Greeks as Smendes) took over as the first king of the Twenty-First Dynasty (c. 1076–944 BCE). Smendes is of unknown origin, possibly a descendant of the Libyans that had become powerful members of the Egyptian army during the Twentieth Dynasty. It is also possible that his wife, Tentamun, was a member of the royal family, thus legitimizing his claim to the throne.

The Nile had silted up the harbor at Pi-Ramesse, so Nesbanebdjed and his successors stripped the city of many of its statues and cannibalized its buildings for stone in order to build a new capital at Tanis, further north in the Delta. Although officially the pharaoh of a united Egypt, the kings of the Twenty-First Dynasty had to share power with a line of army generals based at Thebes. These generals assumed the office of high priest of Amun and set up a theocracy in which oracles of the gods Amun, Mut, and Khons validated priestly appointments and major policy decisions. While they nominally recognized the authority of the Tanite kings and were related to them by marriage, the Theban warrior-priests effectively controlled Upper Egypt to the region of el-Hiba, just south of the Faiyum. This division of the country marks the beginning of the era Egyptologists call the Third Intermediate Period (c. 1076–664 BCE, see [Table 10.1](#)).

Internally divided and decentralized, Egypt could not exercise much influence abroad, either. A literary work called *The Report of Wenamun*, set at the end of Dynasty 20 or the beginning of Dynasty 21, indicates the depths to which Egyptian power and prestige had sunk soon after 1100 BCE. Wenamun, an envoy sent to Gubal (Byblos) to buy cedar for a new processional barge for Amun-Re, was beset by difficulties. Though he was eventually successful in procuring timber for the king, he was humiliated by the prince of Gubal and chased by the Tjeker (one of the Sea Peoples). Though the end of the story is missing, its message is clear. An emissary from Egypt no longer commanded the respect and deference that would have been accorded him a few generations earlier.

With no more gold coming in from the Nubian mines or tribute arriving from Levantine cities, during the Twenty-First Dynasty the largely independent Libyan commanders who ruled Thebes turned to recycling the wealth of earlier eras. Tomb robbery had occurred earlier in times of chaos, but now it received official sanction. Graffiti testify to the systematic effort by the ruling generals' agents to locate and loot old tombs. The mummies of earlier kings and their wives were removed from their tombs, stripped of most of their jewelry and reburied in groups in a few caches. Their burial goods were taken and some (such as a few sarcophagi and pectorals) were reinscribed and

reused. However, most of the gold and silver objects were melted down into bullion.

The Libyan kings abandoned the Valley of the Kings and buried their dead within the temple enclosure at Tanis. The unrobbed tomb of Psusennes I (Twenty-First Dynasty) demonstrates the great wealth of the pharaoh even in these unstable times. Psusennes was buried with beautifully crafted jewelry in gold and lapis lazuli and wore a gold funerary mask, much like Tutankhamun's. His coffin was of solid silver (even more valuable than gold in Egypt) though his granite sarcophagus originally belonged to Merneptah.

In about 943 BCE, Sheshonq I, another Libyan general and the son-in-law of the last king of Dynasty 21, inaugurated the Twenty-Second Dynasty. Sheshonq (c. 943–923 BCE) reunified Egypt and, near the end of his reign, tried to restore Egyptian power in Palestine and Syria. Called Shishak in the Bible, he attacked the newly created kingdoms of Judah and Israel, forcing Rehoboam of Judah to buy him off with “the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house” (1 Kings 14:25–26; 2 Chronicles 12:2–9). For the next 200 years, Egypt would continue to be ruled by Egyptianized Libyan pharaohs (Dynasties 22, 23 and 24, c. 943 to 728 BCE).

Sheshonq's brief renewal of Egyptian power, however, could not be sustained by his successors. Provincial rulers within Egypt became increasingly powerful, and key offices, especially that of high priest of Amun, once more became hereditary. Around 828 BCE, the royal authority splintered again. Egypt then suffered through another century of anarchy, fragmentation, and sporadic civil war with a new Libyan dynasty (the Twenty-Third) ruling from Leontopolis in the central Delta while the Twenty-Second Dynasty continued at Tanis in the northeastern Delta and a third dynasty, the Twenty-Fourth, briefly ruled at Sais in the western Delta. A major change occurred in 747 BCE when a Nubian (Kushite) king named Piankhi gained control of Thebes and then conquered all of Egypt by about 728 BCE, restoring order once more. His dynasty, the Twenty-Fifth (c. 728–657 BCE), began a revival of Egyptian culture using the Old Kingdom as its model, although Egypt was never again to be ruled by native Egyptians.

Table 10.1 Chronology of Near Eastern Rulers c. 1030–745 BCE

<i>Assyria</i>	<i>Babylonia</i>	<i>Uranu</i>	<i>Egypt</i>	<i>Damascus</i>	<i>Carchemish</i>	<i>Sam'at</i>
		Third Intermediate Period (1076–664)				
Ashur-rabi II (1016–973)	Eulmash-shakin-shami (1003–987) 3 kings (986–984) Mar-biti-apla-usur Nabu-mukin-apli (977–942)			Hadadezer (c. 1003)	Talmi-Teshub (c. 1003) Sobi I	
Ashur-resh-ishi II Tiglath-pileser II (967–935)					Asawaharacza Sobi II Kutuwa	
Ashur-dan II (934–912) Adad-rimri II (911–891) Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884)	3 kings (941–908) Nabu-sharru-ukin (899–888?) Nabu-apla-iddina (887–853?)		Sheshonq I (943–923) Osorkon I (922–888) Takelot I (887–874) Sheshonq II (c. 873)			Gabbar (c. 920) Hamah (c. 890)
Ashurnasirpal II (858–859)		Aramu (c. 850)	Osorkon II (872–842)	Hadadezer II? (850–845)	Singara (c. 870–848)	Hayanu (c. 860–850)
Shamsheser III (858–824)	Marcuk-zakar-shurri I (854–819)					
		Sarduri I (832–825)	Sheshonq III (841–803)	Hazael (845–806)		Khamuwa (c. 840–830)
Shamshi Adad V (823–811)	Marcuk-batasou iqbi Baba aba-iddina	Ishpuni (824–806)			Asirawa	
Adad-nirari III (811–783)	5 unknown kings Nirurta- apla-x	Mema (805–788)	Sheshonq IV (802–792) Pami (792–784)	Ben-Hadad II (806–?)		
Shamsheser IV (783–773)	Marcuk-bel-zeri Marcuk- apla-usur	Argishti I (783–766)	Sheshonq V (782–746)		Yariri Kammi	Panamuwa I (c. 780) Bar-Sor
Ashur-dan III (772–755) Ashur-oini V (754–745)	Erba-Marduk (769–761) Nabu-shuma-ishkun (760–748)	Sarduri II (765–733)			Pisic (738–717)	Panamuwa II (c. 750–730)

Note: All dates are BCE. The most important rulers' names are in boldface.

Egyptian culture changed significantly during the centuries of Libyan domination. In order to achieve some legitimacy in the eyes of the native Egyptians, the Libyan rulers emphasized their worship of Amun-Re, who was now proclaimed the ruler of Egypt as well as king of the gods. This change to a theocratic form of government may have made splintered rule more acceptable to Egyptians, as Amun-Re was the one true king. However, it also increased the power of Theban priests and later the “God’s Wives of Amun” both of which became political positions. The “God’s Wife of Amun” was the highest priestess in the land and was originally held by the king’s wife (see [Chapter 8](#)). In the Third Intermediate Period it became the prerogative of the daughter of the king, who was expected to stay a virgin (Wilkinson 2005: 93). Her position also served as a political tool to control Thebes, and her religious authority even eclipsed that of the high priest of Amun by the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (Taylor 2000: 354–355).

Despite their attempts to use theology to achieve legitimacy, the real authority of the Libyan kings came from the army. Egypt was now essentially a military dictatorship. Forts were constructed throughout Egypt, but especially in Upper Egypt, an area where the population remained mostly native Egyptian. Even cities such as Memphis and Hermopolis were fortified. Most of the provincial governors were army commanders, and their loyalty and ability to control the areas they administered determined the amount of power a given king was able to exercise.

One of the most important changes of the Third Intermediate Period is the change in the Egyptian script and scribal language. The hieratic script, a kind

of shorthand hieroglyphic writing used for business documents during the New Kingdom, developed two different forms—what is called “Abnormal Hieratic” at Thebes and an even more cursive Demotic in the north. Hieratic script even began to take the place of hieroglyphs in some monumental inscriptions. Scribes (especially in the north) also began using colloquial grammatical constructions and phonetic spellings rather than the traditional formal Egyptian. Eventually, the Demotic script won out and became the standard script used to write the vernacular until the fifth century CE when Christians banned the use of all native Egyptian scripts.

Assyria and Babylonia

In the aftermath of the fall of the Kassites, a new dynasty from the city of Isin claimed the titles of king of Babylonia. King Nebuchadnezzar I was successful in sacking Susa and retrieving the statue of Marduk around 1100 BCE, but Mesopotamian power declined after his rule. The effects of invasions, famine, and population decline continued to be felt throughout Mesopotamia until the end of the tenth century BCE.

Other than their names, little is known about most of the Mesopotamian kings of the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE. Babylon experienced several dynastic changes during this time, and its rulers had a difficult time regaining control over the lower Tigris and Euphrates valleys. Their task was complicated by violent raids of the Arameans and the presence of the Chaldeans, a group of people who seem to have settled in the extreme southern part of Mesopotamia between 1000 and 900 BCE. Their origin is unknown, but their tribal names are related to Aramaic. Some scholars think the Chaldeans were originally Aramaeans, while others suggest that they came from eastern Arabia. Like other immigrants into Mesopotamia, the Chaldeans quickly assimilated the local Mesopotamian culture, evidenced by their use of Akkadian and the taking of Babylonian names. However, they retained their tribal organization, being divided into four tribes, each with its own sheikh or “king.” There is little scribal activity from this period, but several inscriptions describe a period of violence and instability, often directed at the new tribal groups such as the Arameans and the Chaldeans. For the next several centuries Babylon remained a weak state often subject to the interventions of the Assyrian kings.

Unlike Babylon, Assyria managed to keep its royal line intact during the time of turmoil. They also kept annual records of the king’s campaigns, thus providing us with a more complete picture of political events. They

experienced a momentary period of triumph under the energetic king Tiglath Pileser I (c. 1114–1076 BCE). He campaigned widely in the north and west, even venturing to the Mediterranean. However, the incursions of the Arameans continued to cause trouble for the Assyrians who entered into a period of decline. Finally, around 930 BCE, Assyria began to stir again. King Ashur-dan II was successful in reestablishing the Assyrian presence in Upper Mesopotamia. A treaty with Babylon in 891 BCE along with a diplomatic marriage secured peace on the southern front, allowing the Assyrian rulers to concentrate on expanding their territory to the Taurus mountains in the north and to the Euphrates River in the west, thus reconstituting the borders of Assyria at the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I.

From the ninth century on, Assyria was the preeminent power in the Near East. The conquests of Ashurnasirpal II (“Ashur is Guardian of the Heir,” 883–859 BCE) are generally accepted as the real beginning of a Neo-Assyrian Empire (see [Table 10.1](#)). This king undertook several military campaigns against small states in the mountains north of Assyria, forcing them to become vassals. He also extended Assyrian power to the east, placing most of the western foothills of the Zagros Mountains under his control. Assyria was poor in resources and labor and both probably motivated the annual military campaigns of neo-Assyrian kings. Fearing the growing Assyrian might, the Aramaean state of Bit-Adini on the middle Euphrates west of the Balikh River encouraged some Assyrian vassals in the lower Habur region to revolt. Ashurnasirpal quickly crushed the revolts, savagely impaling, flaying alive, dismembering, or walling up alive many of the princes and nobles who had led the rebellion. He then invaded Bit-Adini to punish its ruler for inciting revolt. He captured one of its main cities and forced Bit-Adini’s king to pay a large amount of tribute and to provide hostages to Assyria. The news of Ashurnasirpal’s victories spread, and when he crossed the Euphrates, he was able to march unopposed from Carchemish westward across the Orontes River and southward through Lebanon to the sea, thus emulating some of his earlier royal predecessors. The Neo-Hittite king of Carchemish and the rulers of many Phoenician cities, including Tyre, Sidon, and Gubal, decided not to risk Assyria’s wrath and voluntarily paid tribute. To guard against future revolt, Ashurnasirpal established several Assyrian garrison towns in the territories he had conquered. These included Tushhan on the upper Tigris and two fortresses on opposite sides of the middle Euphrates. He also followed the earlier Hittite and Middle Assyrian practice of mass deportations of defeated peoples. Some of the captives became slave labor, while others were settled in sparsely populated areas of Assyria.

The results of Ashurnasirpal’s campaigns provided a strong motive for later Assyrian expansion. The vast amount of booty and captive labor he brought

back to Assyria allowed him to construct a new capital city, Kalhu (called Calah in the Bible and Nimrud today), near the intersection of the Tigris and Zab rivers north of Ashur. The city was largely settled with prisoners brought back to Assyria following his campaigns and with groups of soldiers voluntarily contributed by Carchemish and other subject-allies. The walls of Ashurnasirpal's new royal palace were decorated with frescoes and carved stone slabs exhibiting beautiful bas-relief scenes of *genii* (protective demigods), and images of the king hunting, in warfare, and in ritual activities, as well as bands of cuneiform inscriptions proclaiming his accomplishments. The inscription, repeated on each stone slab, declares that Ashurnasirpal is the "destructive weapon of the great gods," "king of the universe," and "trampler of all enemies," among other praises. Along with the sculptures the message is clear: Ashurnasirpal, and thus Assyria, has the divine right and the human might to rule the world. This is essentially the foundational ideology of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Ashurnasirpal's palace was also adorned with sculptures of human-headed winged bulls and lions flanking the major doorways (see [Figure 10.1](#)), a practice derived from earlier Hittite and Neo-Hittite examples. These sculptures were among the first objects excavated in Mesopotamia in the 1840s CE (see Lloyd 1980; Larsen 1991; Fagan 2007), and they now constitute some of the greatest treasures of the British Museum.



Figure 10.1 Human-Headed Winged Lion (*Lamassu*) from a Doorway in Ashurnasirpal II's Palace at Kalhu

© Lanmas/Alamy Stock Photo.

Ashurnasirpal's victories had established only nominal Assyrian authority over Syria west of the Balikh River. So his son and successor, Shalmaneser III ("The god Shulmanu is Greatest," 858–824 BCE), was tasked with maintaining

the borders of the state and extracting tribute from his father's conquests in the west. However, this time the Syrian kingdoms were better prepared for the Assyrian invasion. Bit-Adini, supported by Carchemish and other north Syrian states, held out for three years before its capital, Til-Barsip (modern Tell Ahmar), was captured and turned into an Assyrian fortress. In the meantime, the small states of Phoenicia, southern Syria, and Palestine also had formed coalitions to oppose Shalmaneser, and he was able to win only partial victories over them. His biggest threat came in 853 BCE, at the Battle of Qarqar in Syria, when a coalition army of approximately 50,000 men from the northern and southern Levant (including Israel, camel-riding Arabs, and possibly troops from Egypt) led by the king of Damascus supported Irhuleni of Hamath against the Assyrian advance (see [Document 10.1](#)). Shalmaneser claimed victory, but he did not capture any of the major cities of the region. The ruler of Damascus maintained his leadership of the anti-Assyrian coalition, keeping the Levant free of Assyrian control for several more years. The alliance broke down, however, when usurpers seized the thrones of Damascus and Israel between c. 845 and 841 BCE. The Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon as well as Jehu, the new king of Israel, paid tribute and became Assyrian vassals in 841 BCE, leaving the kingdom of Damascus alone to withstand Shalmaneser's attacks. Damascus, though, remained free, as did several other Syrian cities.

Document 10.1 The Assyrian Account of the Battle of Qarqar

The following account is taken from the annals of Shalmaneser III's sixth year (853 BCE) according to the so-called Monolith Inscription engraved on a stele found at Kurkh, Iraq. Other less detailed accounts of the campaign were found inscribed on bull statues and on Shalmaneser III's famous Black Obelisk at Kalhu (the biblical Calah, modern Nimrud). This inscription provides many details on the relative strength of various kingdoms in the Levant and is the first extrabiblical reference to the kingdom of Israel. The translation is by A. Leo Oppenheim (1955: 278–279) with slight changes in spelling by W. Stiebing.

I departed from the banks of the Euphrates and approached Aleppo (*Hal-man*). They (i.e., the inhabitants of Aleppo) were afraid to fight and seized my feet (in submission). I received silver and gold as their tribute and offered sacrifices before the Adad of Aleppo. I departed from Aleppo and approached the two towns of Irhuleni from Hamath (*Amat*). I captured the towns Adennu, Barga (and) Argana his royal residence. I removed from them his booty (as well as) his personal (lit: of his palaces) possessions. I set his palaces afire. I departed from Argana and approached Karkara [Qarqar]. I destroyed, tore down and burned down Karkara, his (text: my)

royal residence. He brought along to help him 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalymen, 20,000 foot soldiers of Adad-'idri (i.e., Hadadezer) of Damascus (*Imerishu*), 700 chariots, 700 cavalymen, 10,000 foot soldiers of Irhuleni from Hamath, 2,000 chariots, 10,000 foot soldiers of Ahab, the Israelite (*A-ha-ab-bu Sir-'i-la-a-a*), 500 soldiers from Que, 1,000 soldiers from Musri, 10 chariots, 10,000 soldiers from Irqanata, 200 soldiers of Matinu-ba'lu from Arvad, 200 soldiers from Usanata, 30 chariots, 1[0?],000 soldiers of Adunu-ba'lu from Shian, 1,000 camel-(rider)s of Gindibu', from Arabia, [...]000 soldiers of Ba'sa, son of Ruhubi, from Ammon—(all together) these were twelve kings. They rose against me [for a] decisive battle. I fought with them with (the support of) the mighty forces of Ashur, which Ashur, my lord, has given to me, and the strong weapons which Nergal, my leader, has presented to me, (and) I did inflict a defeat upon them between the towns Karkara and Gilzau. I slew 14,000 of their soldiers with the sword, descending upon them like Adad when he makes a rainstorm pour down. I spread their corpses (everywhere), filling the entire plain with their widely scattered (fleeing) soldiers.... With their (text: his) corpses I spanned the Orontes before there was a bridge. Even during the battle I took from them their chariots, their horses broken to the yoke.

With the west secured, Shalmaneser turned his attention to southern Anatolia, where he could secure access to precious metals. He also had to deal with the growing power of Urartu (see the next section), just north of the Assyrian heartland. During this time Shalmaneser is known to have reaffirmed the alliance with Babylonia. He supported the Babylonian king against a succession uprising and reestablished the peace pact, even commemorating it in a special relief on one of his throne bases in Kalhu.

Shalmaneser had succeeded in consolidating the areas due east and west of the Assyrian heartland and acquiring tributary states in the northern Levant. However, near the end of Shalmaneser III's reign, internal dynastic struggles weakened Assyrian dominance. Shalmaneser's oldest son led a rebellion against his aging father, and the revolt took root in Nineveh, Ashur, and many other Assyrian cities. Shalmaneser designated a younger son, his eventual successor, Shamshi-Adad V (823–811 BCE), to quell the uprising, but it was only with Babylonian aid that Shamshi-Adad finally extinguished the revolt two years after Shalmaneser III died. Surprisingly, this event resulted in a deterioration of Assyro-Babylonian relations, and a few years later Shamshi-Adad attacked Babylon, removed its king, raided the countryside and placed Babylonia under his control, though in name only. The peace between the two countries was now at an end. Shamshi-Adad also appears to have lost control of the Syrian states where Assyrian governors, some of local descent, acted virtually independently of the Assyrian king.

Shamshi-Adad V was succeeded by his son, Adad-nirari III (810 to 783 BCE). It was once thought that Adad-nirari was still a minor when his father died and that his mother, Sammuramat, ruled as regent for a few years. That view

has now been rejected, but Samsuramat does seem to have had more influence than normal for a queen mother during her son's reign. She was powerful enough to inspire later Greek legends about a beautiful, but cruel, Oriental queen named Semiramis. Adad-nirari III restored Assyrian preeminence within Mesopotamia for a time and briefly forced Syria, including Damascus, into tributary status. However, internal revolts, plague, and pressure from the new and growing kingdom of Urartu in the north combined to keep Assyria dormant throughout most of the first half of the eighth century BCE.

Power struggles for the throne of Babylon kept it weak also, allowing the Chaldeans to assume more power in the south. Meanwhile, Mesopotamian power east of the Tigris was also at an ebb. The Medes, a still largely seminomadic Indo-European people, seem to have been gradually settling southeast of Lake Urmia without much interference. The kingdom of Ellipi (modern Luristan), a center for bronze casting south of the Medes, also flourished during this time.

Anatolia

The Kingdom of Urartu

Urartu seems to have coalesced as a kingdom in the mountainous area around Lake Van sometime between 1100 and 850 BCE. In this region (called Ararat in the Bible, the locale where Noah's Ark supposedly landed), three mountain ranges—the Pontic, Zagros, and Caucasus—come together. The kingdom of Urartu eventually occupied most of the territory of later Armenia, with its heartland in the triangular region bounded by Lake Van, Lake Urmia, and Lake Sevan (see [Map 10.1](#)). Many small independent city-states had occupied the area in earlier times, but Hittite attacks from the west and Assyria's expansion to the north in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE may have precipitated the formation of a unified Urartian state (Zimansky 1995: 48). Urartu and Assyria existed in a state of almost constant conflict, but also of enormous influence on one another. The Urartians called their kingdom Bia or Biainili (the name Urartu comes from Assyrian texts), and adapted the Assyrian cuneiform system to write their language, which was related to Hurrian. Unfortunately, the number of known Urartian texts is limited, and they provide us with an incomplete account of Urartian history. Thus, historians

must derive much of their understanding of Urartian history and society primarily from the accounts of Urartu's enemy, Assyria.



Map 10.1 Map of Anatolia and the Neo-Hittite/Aramaean States of the Iron Age

After Trevor Bryce, *The World of the Neo-Hittite Kingdoms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), map 2, p. 32.

Conflict between the two states began in the reign of Shalmaneser III when he encountered king Aramu north of the Tigris River and later the king Sarduri I (see [Table 10.1](#)). Towards the end of the ninth and the beginning of the eighth century BCE when Assyria was weak, two Urartian kings, Ishpuini and his son Menua, elevated Urartu's power and consolidated the state. They built up the capital, called Tushpa (modern Van), introduced a national religion worshipping the god Haldi, put the Urartian language into writing, and built roads and canals tying the state together. Under their reigns Urartu expanded into eastern Turkey, Transcaucasia in the north, and northwestern Iran in the southeast. Menua expanded the boundaries of Urartu, conquering the important stronghold of Hasanlu (in present-day Iran) on its southeastern border and Musasir on the border of Assyria. He erected fortresses along vital important trade routes, including at Hasanlu and Bastam (between Lake Urmia and Lake Sevan). He also campaigned westwards and northwards opening Urartian access to the trade routes of the Mediterranean and Anatolia, which were later capitalized on by his successor Argishti I.

This Urartian expansion threatened to block Assyria's access to vital trade

routes through the upper Zagros Mountains and the Taurus Range. When Assyria became strong again after 744 BCE, the Assyrian kings launched attack after attack on Urartu. These were only moderately successful. Though Urartu is relatively close to Assyria, it is cut off by high mountains that are covered with snow for most of the year. The rugged terrain made it extremely difficult to move horses, siege equipment, and baggage carts through them. Moreover, Urartu was a state consisting of isolated hilltop fortresses. Even when the Assyrians succeeded in besieging and destroying some Urartian cities, others remained protected by the mountain ranges dividing the country. Assyria's victories thus failed to subdue Urartu. The final date and agents of the destruction of Urartu are still unknown, though she seems to have succumbed to either the Scythians or the Medes in the mid-seventh or early sixth century BCE (Rollinger 2003: 315, note 128, Aylvazian 2012: 886).

The mountains of Urartu were rich in copper, silver, and iron, and Urartian artisans were noted for their metalwork, especially in bronze and iron. Many fine examples of Urartian weapons and armor display a novel mix of motifs and themes drawn from northern Syria, the Assyrians, and the Scythian world (see [Figure 10.2](#)). It was once thought that many of the large bronze cauldrons in the graves of Italy and Greece were imports from Urartu. It is now likely that the influence was less direct and cauldrons with bull, siren, and lion attachments were of North Syrian derivation, although these may have been inspired by Urartian examples (Muscarella 1992).

There are fertile plains in Armenia protected by high mountains and watered by many mountain springs and streams. Here the Urartians maintained extensive herds of horses, cattle, sheep, and goats, and with the help of irrigation canals, grew grain, grapes, and fruit trees. They stored the produce from the plains in heavily garrisoned and fortified royal citadels usually built atop steep rocky ridges. These centers, Tushpa (Van), the capital, Ayanis, and Karmir Blur, were the centers of administrative districts possibly ruled by governors. For withstanding sieges, these almost impregnable strongholds generally had stockpiles of weapons, enormous cisterns cut into the rock, and many large storage jars filled with grain and other agricultural products, including wine. They guarded approaches to the heart of the kingdom and served as refuges for the residents of lower-lying areas during invasions.

Urartu's principal deity was Haldi, probably a war god, whose main temple, as mentioned above, was eventually located at Musasir, a strong fortress on the southeastern border of the kingdom, between Assyria and Lake Urmia. Often he was worshipped at outdoor rock cut niches that served as symbolic gateways between heaven and earth. Haldi also had important temples in Tushpa, the religious and political capital of Urartu, though Tushpa's city god

was Shiwini, the sun god. Another major deity was Teisheba, the Urartian equivalent of Teshub, the Hurrian weather god. The temples of these gods, as revealed by archaeological excavations, were usually square (about fifty feet per side) with very thick walls. These walls could have supported upper stories, and the Urartian temples may have been tower-like buildings similar to those of the later Persians.



Figure 10.2 Urartian Bronze Helmet, Eighth-Seventh Century BCE

Museum Fine Arts Houston. © Bridgeman Images.

The Phrygian and Neo-Hittite Kingdoms

One of the regions to see the most profound changes in the transition from the second millennium BCE to the first was Anatolia. After the fall of the Hittite Empire, Anatolia became fragmented into a number of independent states ruled by new populations. As we have seen, the Phrygians probably entered Asia Minor during the turmoil of the twelfth century BCE (see [Chapter 9](#)). However, little is really known about these people or their origins. The Phrygian language is Indo-European, but it is not closely related to the Anatolian languages (Hittite, Luwian, and Palaic) spoken elsewhere in Asia Minor. Instead, Phrygian is more closely related to Greek and Thracian. This fact supports the ancient Greek tradition that the Phrygians were originally from Thrace. The earliest known Phrygian inscriptions come from the eighth century BCE and are written with an alphabet borrowed either from Greece or from Phoenicia (probably learned through inscriptions of Neo-Hittite states in southeastern Anatolia who began using the Phoenician alphabet in addition to Hittite hieroglyphs). Phrygian inscriptions are few in number and not well understood.

The Phrygian kingdom, created during the “dark age” between c. 1100 and 850 BCE, was located in west-central Anatolia (see [Map 10.1](#)). Its capital, Gordion, was probably named for Gordias, an early king or possibly one of several early kings of that name, for some historians think that Gordias was a dynastic name, alternating with Mita (Midas). During the ninth century BCE, Phrygia seems to have expanded its power eastward where they came into contact with both Urartu and Assyria. The Assyrians knew the Phrygians as the Mushki and dealt with a ruler named Mita (Midas). The Phrygians may have absorbed this eastern tribe, or we may just have two names for the same people (Sagona and Zimansky 2009: 353). The Phrygian kingdom, as evidenced through epigraphic evidence and distinctive Phrygian pottery stretched from the northwest to all of central Anatolia and the old Hittite heartland. It is likely that it was ruled by a monarchy based at Gordion although this is uncertain. To the west and south of Phrygia, other new principalities with new dynasties were arising out of the ashes of the Late Bronze Age: Lydia and Greek cities in the west, and Lycia and Cilicia in the south (discussed in [Chapter 12](#)).

The Phrygians’ main deity was a fertility goddess called Matar Kubileya (“Mother Mountain”), the same goddess later worshipped in Lydia and on the western coast of Asia Minor as Kubele (or Cybele). She was the life-giving goddess of mountains and nature. On monuments in the Phrygian highlands, sculptors usually depicted her standing in the doorway of a building, possibly her temple. Unlike the later depictions of Kubele from Ephesus, the Phrygian goddess wears a long belted dress, a tall cylindrical hat, and a veil covering her entire body. Midas City was a principal religious center for the worship of Kubele and other Phrygian deities, and many tombs were cut into the hillsides

there.

As in Urartu, much of Phrygia's prosperity stemmed from exploitation of Anatolia's metal deposits. The kingdom became known for its fabulous wealth, so much so that in Greek legend, King Midas of Phrygia turned anything he touched into gold. Phrygian metalsmiths, modeling their work in part on that of Urartu, produced many beautiful objects, some of which they traded to Greece and points further west. A huge eighth-century BCE intact burial mound at Gordion (traditionally credited to Midas but in fact too early for his death) has yielded hundreds of bronze vessels, fibulae (large, decorated safety pins), and other objects, as well as some of the earliest known brass vessels, but no gold or other precious materials (Sams 2001). Some scholars have suggested that the Phrygian discovery of brass, a bright yellow alloy of copper and zinc, might have been behind the Greek belief in Midas's golden touch.

Under King Midas, Phrygia became an ally of Assyria, but earlier it had close political links with Carchemish and other Neo-Hittite states. These small descendants of the Hittite Empire developed along and across principal trade routes in south-central Anatolia, Cilicia, and northern Syria. They usually centered around one or more heavily fortified cities like Carchemish or Sam'al and taxed all trade passing through their territories (see [Map 10.1](#)). The Neo-Hittite (or "Syro-Hittite") kings of Carchemish traced their ancestry to the Hittite viceroys of that city who were descendants of Suppiluliuma I (c. 1344 to 1322 BCE), and the rulers of other Neo-Hittite states probably also came from branches of the old Hittite royal family. In the first millennium BCE, the term Hatti itself came to refer exclusively to the region of Syria and southeastern Anatolia. Thus, most references in the Bible to Hatti or Hittites refer to the Neo-Hittite kingdoms rather than the earlier Bronze Age Hittite Empire. The citizens of these states, however, were a mixture of remnants of the previous local peoples, Hurrians, Luwian-speaking Anatolian refugees, and, increasingly in Syria and Cilicia, Aramaeans. Recent finds at the Neo-Hittite sites of Tell Tayinat (ancient Kinaluwa) and Aleppo also suggest an influx of Aegean peoples, perhaps part of the movements of the "Sea Peoples" into western Syria and Cilicia at the end of the Bronze Age (Gunter 2012: 802).

Document 10.2 Inscription of Kilamuwa, King of Sam'al (Zincirli)

Standing in the entranceway to a public building at Zincirli, this inscription demonstrates the mixed societies of northern Syria. Kilamuwa has a Luwian name, but his ancestors all have West Semitic names. He writes in Phoenician, but wears Assyrian-style clothing. He also describes

his alliance with Assyria and his enmity with the neighboring Danunians (a people occupying Cilicia). The inscription is dated to the last quarter of the ninth century BCE and the translation is based on K. Lawson Younger (2003).

I am Kulamuwa, the son of Ḥayyā. Gabbār ruled over Y'DY, but he achieved nothing. BNH also (ruled over Y'DY), but he achieved nothing. Then my father Ḥayyā, but he achieved nothing. And then my brother Ša'il, but he achieved nothing. But I am Kulamuwa, son of TML—what I achieved, (my) predecessors had not achieved.

The house of my father was in the midst of mighty kings. Each one stretched forth his hand to fight. But I was in the hand of the kings like a fire consuming the beard and like a fire consuming the hand. The king of the Danunians was more powerful than I, but I engaged against him the king of Assyria. A young woman was given for a sheep and a young man for a garment.

I am Kulamuwa, son of Ḥayyā. I sat upon the throne of my father. During the reigns of the former kings, the muškabīm were living like dogs. But I was to some a father; and to some I was a mother; and to some I was a brother. Whoever had never possessed a sheep, I made a lord of a flock. Whoever had never possessed an ox, I made owner of a herd and owner of silver and lord of gold. Whoever from his childhood had never seen linen, now in my days wore byssos. I took the muškabīm by the hand and they showed (me) affection like the affection of a fatherless child toward (its) mother.

Now, whoever of my descendants (literally, “sons”) sits in my place and damages this inscription—may the muškabīm not honor the ba'ririm and may the ba'ririm not honor the muškabīm. And whoever strikes out this inscription, may Baal Šemed, (the god) of Bamah, and Rāḱib-El, the lord of the dynasty (literally, “house”), strike his head.

Though they were not united or even always allied with one another, these kingdoms continued to reflect many aspects of Hittite culture. They maintained the old Hittite beliefs in the king's responsibility for security, prosperity, and justice and the need for vassals to be absolutely loyal to their overlords. Their principal deities derive from those of the Hittite Empire, and their art continues Hittite conventions and style. Initially, they also used the earlier Hittite hieroglyphs to write their language, which, as we have seen in [Chapter 9](#), was a dialect of Luwian. However, in Sam'al (modern Zincirli), a city-state on the border between Syria and Anatolia, most inscriptions eventually were written in a dialect of the Aramaic language, and some of the kings had Semitic names (see [Document 10.2](#)). Thus, Trevor Bryce identifies Sam'al/Zincirli as an Aramean rather than a Neo-Hittite state even though much of the art and architectural styles would be classified as Neo-Hittite. The current excavators of the site argue that Luwians occupied the area in the post-Hittite Period, but were eventually replaced by the descendants of the original

Amorite population of the region rather than Aramaeans (Schloen and Fink 2009: 208). At other sites, such as Karatepe in Cilicia, Phoenician was the language of choice. Both sites demonstrate the influx of Luwian and Semitic speakers into this region after the collapse of the Hittite Empire.

These early Iron Age kingdoms, Malatya, Carchemish, Sam'al, Aleppo, and Tell Tayinat (Patina/Unqi) are best known for the elaborate stone relief carvings on the exterior of gates, temples, and palaces (see [Figure 10.3](#)). The scenes, created in an admixture of Hittite and Syrian styles, often depict hybrid mythological creatures, images of the gods and scenes of war. Occurring from the eleventh century BCE or slightly earlier, many scholars assume that these works inspired the relief carvings of the later Assyrian palaces and possibly even influenced the construction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. The Neo-Hittite states were also the centers of production for luxury goods such as ivory and wood furniture much coveted by the Assyrians.



Figure 10.3 Carving of a Chariot on an Orthostat from Carchemish, Late Tenth Century BCE

The stone reliefs at Carchemish exemplify the mix of influences that characterizes north Syria in the early Iron Age. The dynasty has non-Luwian names, but uses Luwian hieroglyphs and worships Luwian gods. The tradition of carving reliefs on stone orthostats goes back to the Hittites as well.

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One of the most important Neo-Hittite kingdoms in the eighth century BCE was Tabal (biblical Tubal) located south of the Halys River in the area the Hittites had called the Lower Land. In the mid-ninth century BCE, there were many small independent kingdoms in this area, but early in the eighth century

BCE they merged into a single state or confederacy. In Tabal, a dynasty descended from someone named Burutas ruled a mixed Luwian and Hurrian population. The main deities of the kingdom were the storm god Tarhunza and the goddess Kubaba, a later form of the Hurrian/Hittite goddess Hepat. Like Carchemish, Tabal was a major partner in eighth century BCE alliances to block Assyrian expansion into northern Syria and Anatolia. However, by the end of the eighth century BCE, it and all of the Neo-Hittite states became provinces of the Assyrian Empire.

Syria

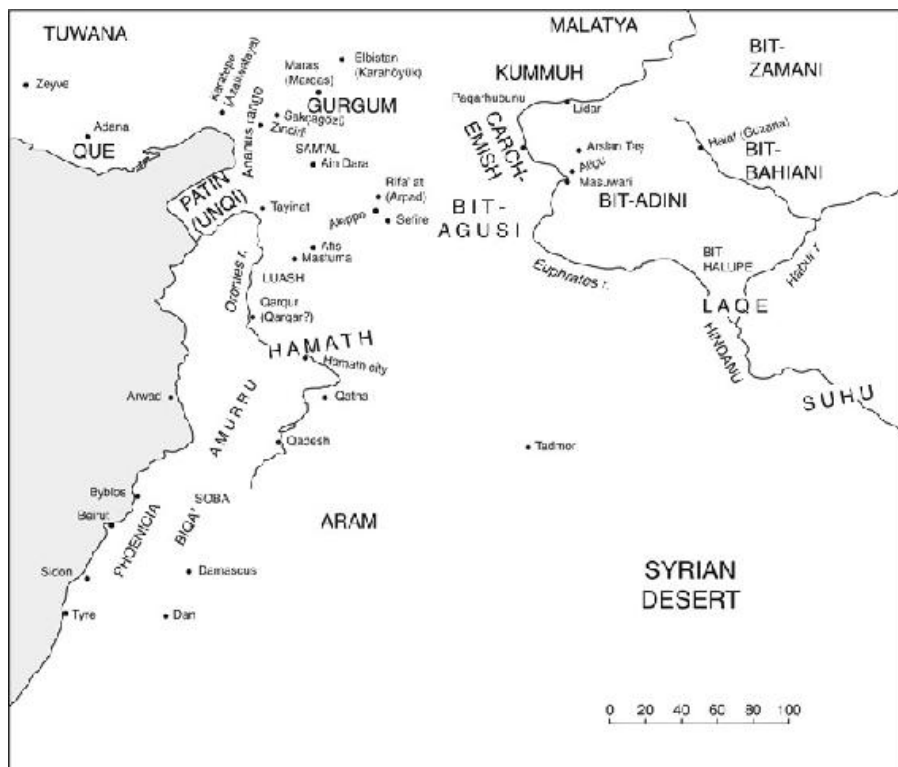
The Aramaeans

The Aramaeans, speakers of a West-Semitic language closely related to Canaanite (Phoenician and Hebrew), probably originated in southern Syria in the latter part of the Bronze Age. As we have seen, during the population movements accompanying the disasters of the late thirteenth through the twelfth centuries BCE, groups of Aramaeans repeatedly invaded Baby-lonia, Elam, Assyria, northern Syria, and eastern Anatolia. By the time they erupted onto the scene, they were divided into many different tribes and clans (at least forty Aramaean tribes are known from Babylonian sources alone). In most of the areas where they settled, especially in Assyria, eastern Babylonia, and southeastern Anatolia, the Aramaeans became a part of the population. In much of the northern Levant and eastern Syria, they became the dominant portion of the population and the rulers of several small kingdoms ([Map 10.2](#)). West of the Euphrates, they took over some Neo-Hittite kingdoms or founded others. In Mesopotamia west of the Habur River, the region known in the Bible as Aram-Naharaim (“Aram of the Two Rivers”), the Aramaean kingdoms of Bit-Adini, Bit-Bahyani (whose capital, Guzana, was called Gozan in the Bible and is now Tell Halaf), Bit-Zamani, and Bit-Halupe became powerful. Several of these kingdoms remained intact and continued to flourish until the seventh century BCE, despite being brought under Assyrian hegemony by Shalmaneser III (858 to 824 BCE). In Syria east of the Euphrates they founded the kingdoms of Arpad, Bit Agusi, and Hamath (modern-day Hama) and possibly established a dynasty at Zincirli (Sam’al).

The most important of the Aramaean states was centered on Damascus, an ancient city in south-central Syria. The Bible calls this kingdom Aram-

Damascus. The exact antiquity of Damascus is unknown, for its earliest remains are buried under the present-day Old City and have not been excavated. Third-millennium BCE pottery sherds have been found in the Old City, however, and the city's original name, Dimaska, is not Semitic, suggesting that the city was founded in prehistoric times. Moreover, Damascus was first mentioned in an inscription of Thutmose III from c. 1457 BCE, so clearly it had been occupied long before the Aramaeans began ruling it. Many think it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

The history of the Aramean states can be traced through the few surviving Aramaic royal inscriptions, the Bible, and in large part, Assyrian texts. According to the Bible, in the tenth century BCE, Damascus was an ally or vassal of the Aramaean kingdom of Zobah. This kingdom, centered on the region of Beth Rehob in Lebanon's Beqaa valley, came into existence at about the same time as the Israelite state and attained dominion over most of southern Syria. David supposedly defeated Zobah's king Hadadezer and an Aramaean army from Damascus that came to his aid, thus gaining control of Zobah's territory (2 Samuel 8 = 1 Chronicles 17). The Bible further states that during Solomon's reign, an Aramaean leader (there "named" Rezon which means "prince") made himself king of Damascus and established its independence, creating the foundation for its later political power in Syria (1 Kings 11:23–25).



Map 10.2 Map of Aramean Kingdoms in Syria

After Trevor Bryce, *The World of the Neo-Hittite Kingdoms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), map 3, p. 46.

As previously mentioned, in the ninth century BCE, Damascus led several coalitions seeking to prevent Assyrian expansion beyond the Euphrates River at the Battle of Qarqar. Assyrian texts from the reign of Shalmaneser III indicate that the king of Damascus during the 850s BCE was named Adad-idri (Hadad-idhr in Aramaic and Hadadezer in the Bible). The Assyrian accounts also attest that one of Hadadezer's most powerful allies was king Ahab of Israel (see [Document 10.1](#)). However, the Bible (1 Kings 20 and 22, 2 Kings 5–8) states that Ben-Hadad (Bir-Hadad or Bar-Hadad in Aramaic) was the ruler of Aram-Damascus at the time of Ahab and his sons. This king is usually called Ben-Hadad II, since another Ben-Hadad is supposed to have reigned earlier in the ninth century during the reigns of Baasha of Israel and Asa of Judah (1 Kings 15:16–22). Some historians identify the Adad-idri mentioned in the Assyrian sources with Ben-Hadad (II) of the Bible (e.g., Millard 1992: 346; Hallo and Simpson 1998: 124). Others (including the authors of this book), however, argue that originally, 1 Kings 20–22 and 2 Kings 5–8 did not name the Israelite king who opposed Ben-Hadad. They theorize that a later editor

wrongly assumed that these passages belonged to the time of Ahab (c. 873–852 BCE) when they really referred to the reign of Jehoahaz (c. 813–797 BCE). These scholars agree with the Assyrian evidence that the king of Aram-Damascus at the time of Ahab was Hadadezer (e.g., Pitard 1987: 115–125; 1992a: 339–340; 1992b: 664; Rogerson 1999: 104–105; Horn and McCarter 2011: 147–148).¹

Hadadezer seems to have been assassinated around 845 BCE by Hazael, a usurper (called “the son of a nobody” by the Assyrians), who seized the throne and reigned c. 845–800 BCE. Upon Hadadezer’s death, the successful anti-Assyrian alliance he had led for many years collapsed. Jehoram (also called Joram), a son of Ahab and king of Israel (c. 851–841 BCE), attacked Hazael, presumably to restore the old dynasty to the throne of Damascus. However, Jehoram was seriously wounded in a battle with the Aramaeans at Ramoth-Gilead in Transjordan and Hazael captured some of Israel’s territory. Some scholars (e.g., Horn and McCarter 2011: 151–152) have asserted that he celebrated this triumph by erecting a victory stele at Dan in Israel (see [Chapter 13](#)). However, the identity of the author of the stele is disputed, with some (e.g., Athas 2005) arguing that it was Ben-Hadad II.

With the Israelite army tied down by the confrontations with Damascus, Moab, which probably had revolted against Israelite control around the time of Ahab’s death (c. 852 BCE), attained its freedom under the leadership of Mesha of Dibon. Meanwhile, Edom also successfully freed itself from Israel’s ally, Judah. These losses, as well as local opposition to some of the religious policies of Omri’s dynasty (see [Chapter 13](#)), fueled a military coup d’état in Israel led by an officer named Jehu. Jehu became king of Israel (c. 841–813 BCE) and, along with the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, hastened to make peace with Assyria, paying tribute and possibly encouraging Shalmaneser III to attack Damascus.

Damascus had to stand alone against Shalmaneser’s attacks in 841 BCE, but though Hazael was defeated in battle, he retreated to his capital city, which withstood the Assyrian assault. Shalmaneser made a final unsuccessful attempt to conquer Damascus in 838 BCE before abandoning his efforts to control all of Syria. Hazael was then able to raise Damascus to the height of its power. He took his revenge on Jehu, conquering most of Israel’s territory east of the Jordan (2 Kings 10:32–33) and virtually reducing Israel to a state of vassalage. He also overpowered Philistia and forced Judah to become a tributary ally (2 Kings 12:17–18). Thus, by the end of his reign, Hazael had made Damascus into the strongest state in the Levant.

Around 800 BCE, Hazael was succeeded by his son Ben-Hadad (Bir-Hadad), probably the second king of Damascus to have that name (or the third if one accepts the theory that a Ben-Hadad briefly succeeded Hadadezer and was the king killed by Hazael, as the Bible claims). Ben-Hadad inherited a thriving

kingdom, but he was unable to maintain the dominion his father had achieved. Adad-nirari III of Assyria attacked Damascus in 796 BCE and forced Ben-Hadad to pay tribute and become a vassal. Israel was able to reestablish its independence from Damascus, inflicting several defeats on Ben-Hadad's forces, and the hapless king also suffered a reverse while attacking the Aramaean kingdom of Hamath. Aram-Damascus then continued to decline until Assyria ended its status as an independent state in the mid-eighth century BCE.

The Aramaeans assimilated much of the culture that already existed in places that they settled. Their chief deity was the Amorite and Canaanite storm god Hadad (known as Adad in Mesopotamia) or Ramman (Rimmon in the Bible). Hadad was the proper name of the deity called Ba'al ("Lord") in the Ugaritic texts and the Bible. Ramman was one of his epithets, probably meaning "the Thunderer" or "the Roaring One." Hadad was also known as Ba'al-Shamayn ("Lord of the Heavens") and was responsible for life-giving rain, and thus, was a god of fertility. But he also caused destructive storms (lightning was his weapon and thunder his voice), so he was seen as a warrior and god of battle, as well. Like the Hurrian weather god, Teshub, Hadad's sacred animal was the bull, and he was sometimes depicted standing on the back of a bull while launching his thunderbolts. The Aramaeans' principal goddess was Atar'ate (later known as Atargatis), Hadad's consort. She was an amalgam of the Canaanite goddesses Ashtart (Astarte in Greek, Ashtoreth in the Bible, and 'atar in Aramaic) and Anat ('at in Aramaic), and like her male partner, she was both a fertility and a war deity.

Like the neighboring Phoenicians and Israelites, the Aramaeans believed that the gods could communicate with humans by means of ordinary people as well as through professional prophets and seers attached to specific cult places. The eighth century BCE inscription of King Zakkur of Hamath provides an example of the acceptance of such messages:

I lifted my hands to Baal-shamayn, and Baalshamayn [sic] answered me, and Baalshamayn [sic] spoke to me through prophets and messengers; and Baalshamayn [sic] said to me: "Fear not! It was I who made you king, [and I shall stand] with you, and I shall deliver you from all these kings who have forced a siege upon you."

(Kuhrt 1995: 459–460)

This text sounds very much like biblical passages in which Israel's god, Yahweh ("the LORD" in English translations), delivers similar messages through prophets.

Aramaean cities of Syria provided an abundance of grains, garlic, and livestock to their Assyrian overlords. The prosperity of the major Aramaean cities also came from their positions on major trade routes. Damascus became

especially wealthy because of its position on both the north-south and east-west camel caravan routes through Syria. Though camels had been domesticated much earlier, their usefulness as mounts and beasts of burden does not seem to have been widely exploited until around 1100 BCE when they start to be mentioned in Near Eastern texts and depicted in art.² Once they began to be used for more than food, they revolutionized Near Eastern trade. Camels could eat a wide variety of plants, including desert shrubs and thorn bushes, and could go without water for much longer than donkeys, the primary beasts of burden in earlier times. Thus, camel caravans could take shorter, more direct paths between distant cities rather than following the meandering courses of rivers or circuitous routes with many water sources along the way, as had been customary earlier. They also allowed merchants to transport spices, incense, and other materials from southern and coastal Arabia overland along Arabia's western coast through Transjordan or Palestine to Damascus and Phoenicia.

The significant role of Damascus as a center for caravan trade, as well as the widespread settlements of Aramaeans between the Zagros Mountains and eastern Anatolia, resulted in Aramaic becoming a second language for most individuals involved in long-distance overland trade. Moreover, around 1100 BCE, some Aramaeans had adopted the Canaanite (Phoenician) alphabet to write their language, and by the mid-eighth century BCE, they had developed a cursive script from it. Aramaic thus became much easier to read and write than Akkadian cuneiform and after Assyria's conquest of the Aramaean states in the eighth century BCE, the Assyrians began to use Aramaic to communicate with their western provinces. Due to the forced resettlement of many Aramaeans in Assyria and various conquered territories, Aramaic eventually became a second official language of the Assyrian Empire (see [Figure 10.4](#)). By Persian times, Aramaic had become the *lingua franca* of the entire Near East. It eventually replaced Hebrew as the common spoken language of Judah, and the Aramaic script not only was adopted to write Hebrew, but also became the ancestor of the later scripts used to write Arabic and Syriac.



Figure 10.4 An Eighth-Century BCE Assyrian Relief

This relief shows scribes making records of enemy heads in Akkadian cuneiform (scribe in the rear with clay tablet) and in Aramaic (scribe in the front with papyrus or parchment).

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The Phoenicians

The classical Greeks called the people who lived in the Levantine coastal cities north of Palestine “Phoenicians” (*Phoinikes*), and later historians have followed their lead. Most scholars think that the name was derived from *phoinix*, the Greek word for the Mediterranean murex (a shellfish) and the dark red or red-purple color of the dye made from it. Thus, to the Greeks, the Phoenicians would have been the “people of the red-purple dye,” since this was their most famous product. Some experts argue, though, that the name Phoenician came from *Fenkhu*, one of the Egyptian appellations for northern Canaan. In any case, the designation was a foreign one.

The Phoenicians usually identified themselves by the names of their city-states (e.g., Sidonians or Tyrians), though they could also be called Canaanites (or residents of the land of Canaan). The name Canaan for the area of southern coastal Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine west of the Jordan occurs in cuneiform and Egyptian texts from the early second millennium BCE onward. Its

etymology is uncertain, though it is probably of West Semitic origin (Schmitz 1992). Phoenician language and culture continued to be closely related to those of the southern Canaanites of Palestine.

During the Late Bronze Age, the Phoenician cities, especially Gubal (Byblos), had been important subjects of the Egyptian Empire, and most of their trade had been monopolized by Egypt. However, when the major empires were shattered during the general eastern Mediterranean political and cultural collapse in the early part of the twelfth century BCE, the Phoenician cities became free to pursue their own destinies. Moreover, Ugarit, the most important Late Bronze Age maritime outlet for trade from inland Syria and eastern Anatolia, had been totally destroyed, leaving a vacuum for other coastal cities to fill. The Phoenicians rushed into the void, becoming the main maritime traders of the Mediterranean world until the seventh century BCE when they had to start sharing that distinction with the Greeks.

The mountains of Lebanon often come down almost to the sea, with spurs and gorges dividing the coastal area into many small districts. So as in ancient Greece, there was no unified Phoenician nation or realm. Though a large city such as Sidon occasionally would dominate a smaller neighbor like Sarepta, most Phoenician cities were independent self-governing states. They were built on small offshore islands or on promontories with protected anchorages and some space between the sea and the hills. Arvad (modern Ruad, Syria), Sidon (modern Saida, Lebanon), and Tyre (modern Sur, Lebanon), located at points where roads from the interior reached the coast by means of passes through or around the Lebanon mountains, became Phoenicia's major cities. Other ports such as Berytus (Beirut), Sarepta, and even Gubal (Byblos) were relegated to secondary status.

Archaeology shows that during the late twelfth and early eleventh centuries BCE, trade resumed between Phoenicia, Cyprus, and the Philistine towns along the coast of Palestine, restoring prosperity to these areas. Phoenician cultural influence spread into parts of Cyprus, Cilicia, Syria, northern Palestine, Philistia, and the Nile Delta. In the case of northern Palestinian sites such as Dan, Tell Keisan, and Dor, it is possible that the Phoenician elements were imposed after military conquest (by Tyre?) (Markoe 2000: 30). Within Phoenicia itself, towns began expanding, improving their layouts, and rebuilding their defensive walls. By the tenth century BCE, there is evidence that Phoenician ships were not only sailing frequently to Cyprus, but also further west to Crete, the Greek island of Euboea, and probably as far as the island of Sardinia. Such long-distance trade paved the way for subsequent Phoenician colonization.

Though Sidon initially had the advantage of having a larger territory to support its population as well as access through the mountains to the rich

Beqaa valley and Damascus, by the tenth century BCE, Tyre surpassed it in wealth and power. The Bible claims that King Hiram I of Tyre (c. 971–939 BCE) formed an alliance with Solomon that included joint commercial expeditions to Ophir from Ezion-geber (perhaps modern Jezirat Far‘oun), a port on the Gulf of Aqaba near modern Eilat. The fabled land of Ophir was noted for its choice, high-quality gold, precious stones, fine hardwoods, and exotic animals. It likely was located on the lower part of the Red Sea in southwestern Arabia, opposite the African land the Egyptians called Punt. The treaty with Israel also gave Tyre access through Israelite territory to Damascus and Syria. The Bible says that Solomon later sold Hiram twenty cities in the agriculturally productive Acco plain and Galilee, allowing Tyre to feed its population without having to rely on agricultural imports.

Even if the biblical accounts of Solomon’s reign are disregarded as late and fanciful (see [Chapter 13](#)), archaeological evidence testifies to strong Phoenician connections with Dan, Hazor, Tel Amal (just west of Beth-shean) in the north, and Tel Masos (a little southeast of Beersheba) in the Negev, the dry southern part of Palestine (see [Map 13.1](#) in [Chapter 13](#)). The locations of these sites suggest Phoenician (almost certainly Tyrian) trade routes across northern Israel to the main north-south overland route (“the King’s Highway”) from Arabia through Transjordan as well as to the route that ran through Palestine, the Negev, and **Arabah** to the Gulf of Aqaba and thence by sea to Africa or southern Arabia (see [Map 10.4](#) in the following section on Arabian kingdoms). Moreover, Tyre had usually been allied with Egypt, and the reassertion of Egyptian power by Sheshonq (945 to 924 BCE) must have strengthened Tyre’s position in relation to Israel, Judah, and the Philistines. In fact, Tyre became so powerful by the first half of the ninth century BCE that even Sidon seems to have become its vassal. King Ithoba‘al I of Tyre (c. 887–856 BCE) claimed to be also “king of the Sidonians,” and his successors continued to use that title until the end of the eighth century BCE (Markoe 2000: 39).

During this time of prosperity, Tyre, Sidon, and Gubal offered gifts (which the Assyrians called “tribute”) to the Assyrian kings Ashurnasirpal II (around 870 BCE) and Shalmaneser III (858–841 BCE). The Assyrian campaigns, though, were aimed at the Neo-Hittite and Aramaean states of western Mesopotamia and Syria, and, as we have seen, were only partly successful. So probably the southern Phoenician “tribute” was paid not so much to avoid attack as to secure continued trading rights in the areas the Assyrians had conquered. Considering the affluence enjoyed by Tyre, Sidon, and to a lesser extent, Gubal during the ninth century BCE, their payments to Assyria seem to have been wise investments. Moreover, despite their failure to join the Aramaean military coalition against the Assyrians, the southern Phoenician states continued to have a strong commercial relationship with Damascus as well as political and

economic ties to Israel. Damascus and Israel supplied Tyre and Sidon with wines and access to the incense trade from Arabia as well as most of the wool the Phoenicians wove into textiles and dyed their expensive red-purple color.

Possibly it was the Assyrian demand for luxury goods from abroad that led the Phoenicians to begin establishing overseas trading posts, which usually became self-governing colonies. The earliest known Phoenician colony (mid-ninth century BCE) was at Kition (modern Larnaka) in Cyprus, though there is some disagreement about whether it was founded by Tyre or Sidon (e.g., Peckham 1992: 352; Markoe 2000: 170). In the following centuries, Phoenician merchants (mostly from Sidon, Arvad, and the Cypriot colonies) proceeded westward from Cyprus by way of Rhodes, Crete, and Greece to the northern Aegean as well as to Sicily, Italy, and Sardinia. The Phoenicians possibly settled Nora in Sardinia as early as the late ninth century BCE, and other colonies in Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta were established during the eighth century BCE (see [Map 10.3](#)). In a second wave of settlement, once again spurred by the growing demands of the Assyrian Empire, the Phoenicians settled along the north African coast as well as southern Spain. At the site of modern Tunis, Tyre established Qart-hadasht (Carthage, “New City” in Phoenician). This “New City,” probably founded around 750 BCE, became, of course, not only the most important Phoenician colony, but eventually a state far richer and more powerful than even its mother city, Tyre. The Tyrian merchants continued from Carthage along the coast of North Africa to Spain. They even sailed outside of the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic Ocean, planting their first Spanish colony, Gadir (“Fortified Citadel”), on a small island in a sheltered bay. This settlement would develop into later Cadiz (see [Map 10.3](#)). In the seventh century BCE, the Phoenicians also established several colonies on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. They probably sailed to the Canary Islands and possibly as far as the Azores, Brittany, and England (Markoe 2000: 188–189). Moreover, a contingent of Phoenicians probably circumnavigated Africa while in the employ of the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II (610 to 595 BCE).³

There was a common thread connecting most of these areas of Phoenician exploration, trade, and colonization: the metals trade. Cyprus was an important source of copper, and Crete produced iron ore. Thasos and nearby Thrace in the northern Aegean region had rich deposits of gold and silver. The Etruscan area of northern Italy yielded copper, lead, iron, and especially, silver ores. Sardinia also was rich in copper, iron, and silver-bearing lead ores. Morocco’s mountains contained gold, copper, iron, and lead, while Spain was one of the Mediterranean’s most important metal-producing areas, blessed with deposits of gold, silver, copper, tin, and iron. In some of these places, especially Spain, archaeologists have uncovered evidence of eighth-seventh century BCE mines and/or metalworking tools such as smelting furnaces,

bellows, and crucibles (Harden 1962: 147–148; Markoe 2000: 172, 177, 179, 184, 187).



Map 10.3 Major Phoenician Colonies of the Ninth through Seventh Centuries BCE

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

As one might expect, the seafaring Phoenicians, endowed with large amounts of native timber, were excellent shipbuilders. They probably first developed the bireme, a ship with two sets of oars on each side, which gave it double the rowing power without adding much to its length. Cargo vessels often had oars to use in calm weather or when coming into port, but the extra oars of a bireme were most effective on warships, providing additional speed and power behind the rams affixed to their bows (see [Figure 10.5](#)). The trireme, an improved version of this concept with three banks of oars to a side, was the main warship used by both the Greek and Persian (largely Phoenician) fleets during the Greek-Persian Wars of the fifth century BCE.

For the raw metals and other native goods they desired, the Phoenicians traded timber, their celebrated dyed cloth, and manufactured products (including finished metallic goods) that their craftsmen created. In addition to shipbuilding, the Phoenicians were noted for their other woodworking skills. Their wooden furniture often had wonderful carved ivory or bone inlays, also created by Phoenician artists who blended Egyptian and Asiatic styles in their work. In addition to inlays, ivory was used to make many small objects such as carved statuettes, boxes, flywhisk handles, cosmetic spoons, amulets, combs, and hairpins. Archaeologists have found these objects in abundance in the storerooms of Assyrian palaces. Stone cutting and carving, sealmaking, and glassmaking were other fields in which Phoenicians excelled. In addition to

their own products, the Phoenicians traded goods from other Near Eastern areas. For example, Gubal provided Greece with sheets of papyrus made from plants grown in Egypt. Thus, the Greek name for Gubal, Byblos, became associated with paper and writing and eventually its diminutive form (*biblion*) became the word for “book” and the source of our word “Bible.”

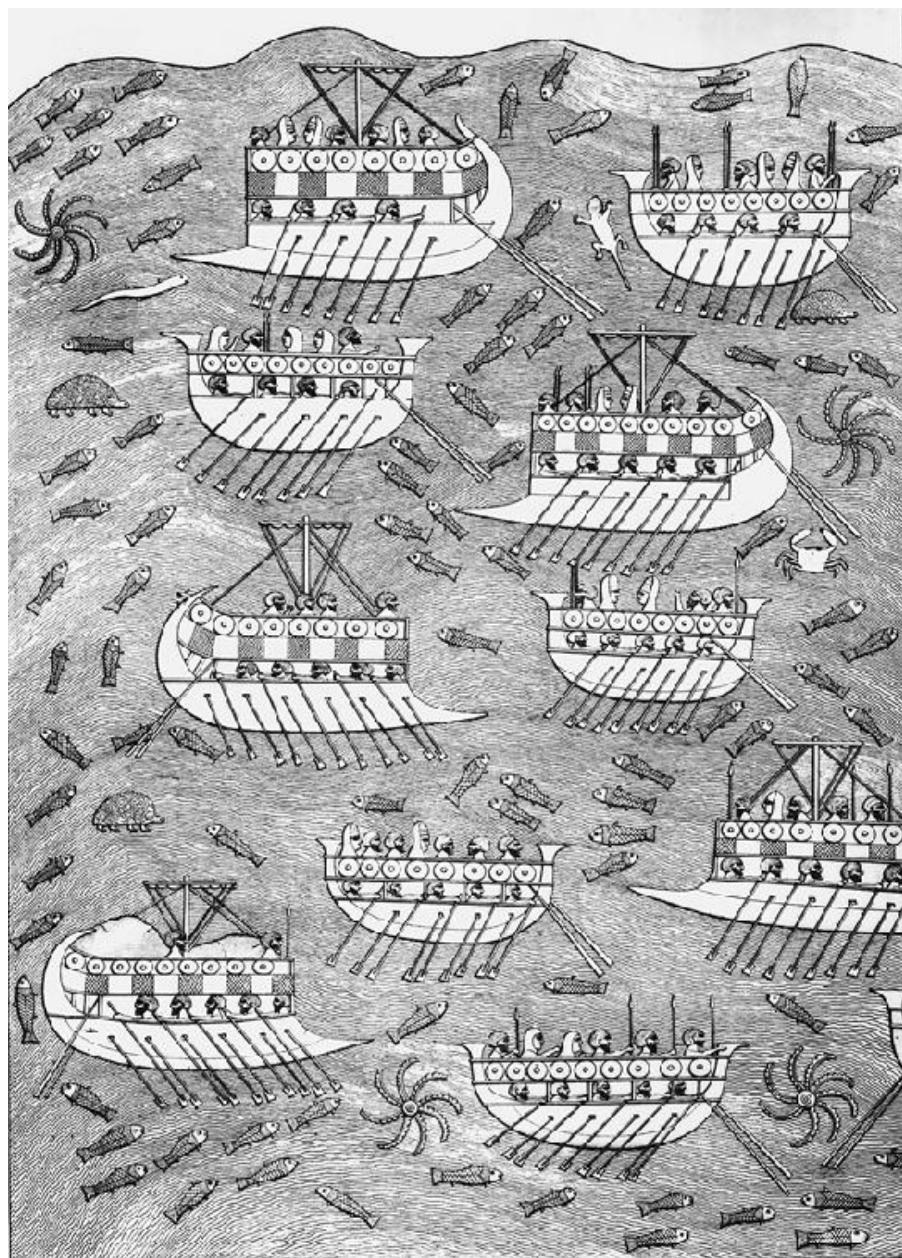


Figure 10.5 An Assyrian Depiction of Phoenician Biremes

This drawing, based on an original Assyrian relief, shows Phoenician bireme cargo vessels and war galleys (the ships with masts and rams) at sea.

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

As in other Near Eastern city-states, Phoenician cities were ruled by kings who also presided over the major religious ceremonies. However, the king's power and authority were not absolute; there was an assembly or a Council of Elders to help the king govern. Little is known about the administration of the early Phoenician colonies. Initially, they probably were closely tied to their mother-cities politically, economically, and religiously. Each colony had a temple to the founding city's patron deity, which helped maintain the relationship between mother and daughter cities. When Phoenicia fell under the control of the Babylonians and Persians, the colonies became self-governing, and some even established colonies of their own. In Carthage and other western colonies, the position of "governor" or suffete became an elective office. "Suffete" is derived from the Latin *sufes* and is used in Western languages to represent the Phoenician title *shuphet* (*shophet* in Hebrew). This word had the more general meaning of "executive, leader, ruler" and in the colonies, more specifically, "governor." Two suffetes who seem to have had most of the powers of the mother-cities' kings were elected each year by the Carthaginian citizen assembly. The formerly advisory oligarchic Council of Elders (or Senate), guided by a smaller inner council, gained the power to declare war and oversee foreign affairs.

Phoenician culture had gradually evolved from that of the Bronze Age Canaanites, so there was much continuity with earlier customs. This is particularly true in regard to the religious pantheon and cultic practices. Most of the Canaanite deities mentioned in Bronze Age Egyptian sources and in the Ugaritic texts were still worshipped in Phoenicia and Palestine during the first millennium. However, Phoenician/Canaanite religion was not static. Some new deities were also introduced, and some of the major gods assimilated the names and characteristics of originally separate deities. Unfortunately, the lack of direct Phoenician documentation makes it impossible to be certain about the details of their religious beliefs and rituals.

Each Phoenician city seems to have had its own divine couple as primary patrons. At Gubal, the chief god was Ba'al Shamem ("Lord of the Heavens"), the Phoenician equivalent of Aramaic Ba'al-Shamayn. This name probably represents the local title by which Hadad (Ba'al), the weather god, was known. His consort was called Ba'alat Gubal ("Lady of Byblos"), which probably is a title for Ashtart (Astarte), goddess of fertility and the principal Phoenician goddess elsewhere. Sidon's chief deities were Eshmun (originally an underworld deity who, nevertheless, promoted health and healing) and

Ashtart (Astarte), while Tyre's were Melqart ("King of the City") and Ashtart (also called Tanit, particularly in the western colonies). Melqart is a title, so this god may have been known by a different name elsewhere. Some think Melqart was originally a solar deity (Harden 1962: 85; Leick 2000: 194), while others think it is more likely that Melqart was the Tyrian title for Ba'al Hadad, because at Carthage he was sometimes called Ba'al Melqart (Markoe 2000: 118). In any case, he became the patron god of seafarers and was the principle god of Carthage and Gadir (Cadiz) as well as Tyre.

All of these chief male deities were probably just localized variants of Ba'al-Hadad, while their consorts are versions of the fertility goddess Ashtart. Whatever their origins, the male patron deities of the major Phoenician cities seem to have been dying and rising fertility deities. Later classical authors describe an annual celebration of Melqart's resurrection at Tyre and similar rites at Byblos for Adonis (a name derived from the Semitic *'adon*, "lord" or *'adonai*, "my lord") who was almost certainly the Byblian Ba'al. Eshmun also was associated with death and rebirth. These ideas probably were derived originally from Mesopotamian rituals associated with Ishtar (the Akkadian equivalent of Ashtart) and Tammuz. However, the Canaanites had borrowed them in the second millennium BCE or earlier. A fifteenth century BCE Ugaritic myth (Ginsberg 1955: 148–141; Wyatt 2002: 115–146) describes a conflict between Mot ("Death") and Ba'al in which Mot kills Ba'al and takes him into the underworld, producing a period of totally dry weather on earth. Ba'al's consort (Anat in the Ugaritic story) challenges Mot to battle, kills him, and subjects his body to ritual agricultural acts: "with a sickle she cut him, with a winnowing fork she winnowed him, with fire she burned him, with millstones she ground him, in a field she scattered him" (translation by W. Stiebing). These actions bring about Ba'al's rebirth and a restoration of rain and fertility. Judging from the later references, the Phoenicians continued to accept a version of this myth about the yearly agricultural cycle and to perform rituals associated with it throughout the first millennium BCE.

Though Phoenicians sometimes made figurines or statuettes of their deities or depicted them (often in stylized form) on pendants, amulets, and stelae, they do not seem to have erected cult statues in their temples. Instead, the gods' presence was indicated by empty thrones or standing stones known as *betyls* (from the Semitic words *bet-el*, "dwelling of god") that could be roughly cut stone slabs or carefully dressed pillars. Such stones were called *massebot* ("dressed stones") in the Bible and were often associated with open air "high places" (*bamot*) as forms of Canaanite worship.

Also like their Bronze Age predecessors, the Iron Age Canaanites and Phoenicians practiced ritual sex, especially in connection with the worship of Ashtart (Astarte). Inscriptions testify to this cultic practice at Phoenician

temples to Ashtart in Sardinia, Tunisia, and Cyprus where both male and female devotees were listed (Markoe 2000: 120, 131; see also Beard and Henderson 1998: 56–79; Budin 2006: 77–92). Documentation is lacking in the Phoenician homeland, but biblical attacks on this Canaanite custom indicate that it was native to the Levant. As in earlier Mesopotamia, individuals seem to have offered themselves sexually for a time to fulfill a vow to the gods or as a sign of their devotion. In Phoenicia, this practice seems to have continued into Roman times.

Biblical writers, especially the prophets, usually had a profoundly negative reaction to Phoenician/Canaanite religious beliefs and customs such as *asherahs*, “high places,” cultic sex acts, and infant sacrifice (see [Chapter 13](#)). However, prophecy itself was also an element of Phoenician/Canaanite religion. Like other Near Eastern peoples, the Phoenicians used many different types of signs and omens to understand supernatural phenomena and to determine the will of the gods. Cultic prophets interpreted such portents. Phoenician cultic prophets were closely associated with priests, and in the biblical Elijah narrative, the prophets of Ba‘al perform sacrifices (1 Kings 18:23), normally a priestly function.

Together the priests and professional prophets maintained and passed on the Phoenician religious tradition. However, the Phoenicians seem to have recognized nonprofessional prophets as well, believing that ordinary citizens could be given messages by the gods. In the *Report of Wenamun*, when the king of Gubal was trying to send Wenamun away, a boy (possibly a court page) became prophetically possessed, experiencing a seizure or convulsion caused by a god. A divine revelation assured him that Wenamun was indeed sent by the god Amun, and he conveyed this message to the king. Similar beliefs are attested in the Mari Letters from the time of Hammurabi, and likely had been held by Bronze Age Canaanites, as well. Thus, like other elements of Bronze Age religion, acceptance of both professional and nonprofessional prophets passed naturally into Phoenician religion and into that of early Israel.

The most important contribution of the Phoenicians to other cultures, though, was the development of the alphabet. In the eleventh century BCE, the Phoenicians refined the Canaanite alphabet of the early second millennium BCE by simplifying the signs into more abstract forms and reducing the number of signs to twenty-two (see [Chapter 8](#)). A century later, it was being used in northern Syria, and by the ninth century BCE it also had been adapted to write Aramaic, Hebrew, and Moabite, and sometime later, Greek and Phrygian. The Greeks further refined the alphabet by using some of the signs to vocalize vowels, thus creating a true one-to-one correspondence between sound and sign (see [Figure 8.6](#) in [Chapter 8](#)). The Semitic origin of the Greek alphabet is evident since they kept the signs in the same order and even

continued to use the Canaanite names of the letters, after a fashion. Thus Canaanite *aleph*, *bet*, *gimel*, and *dalet* became Greek *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, and *delta*. All Western alphabets derive from this modified Greek alphabet either directly (as in the case of Russian and other Slavic scripts) or indirectly (by way of the Etruscans who adapted it and passed it on to the Romans who further modified it and then spread it through the West).

Debating the Evidence: Infant Sacrifice

One Phoenician/Canaanite religious rite that has been hotly debated is their supposed practice of sacrificing children, burning them and presenting them to their gods. Classical authors made this claim about the Carthaginians, and Jeremiah, the biblical prophet, castigates his fellow Judeans for following Canaanite practices, including burning their sons and daughters at Tophet (“Place of Burning”), a ceremonial site near Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:30–32; see also 2 Kings 23:10). At Carthage, Motya, Tharros, and several other sites in Tunisia, Algeria, Sicily, and Sardinia, archaeologists have found sacred burial places which, adopting the biblical term, they call Tophets. Buried beneath stelae in these Tophets were tens of thousands of urns containing cremated remains, some of animals but most of small children, seemingly supporting the classical and biblical authors’ claims.

But some dissenters (e.g., Fantar 2000; Schwartz et al. 2012) deny that these cremated remains are those of sacrificial victims. These scholars question the reliability of the classical and biblical accounts, noting that they were highly polemical in nature. Moreover, they point out that there was an extremely high infant mortality rate in antiquity, and that a high percentage of the remains in the Tophets belong to newborn or premature infants. On the other hand, few infant burials have been found in the regular adult cemeteries at sites containing Tophets. So these scholars claim, the Tophet remains likely are those of stillborn babies or infants who died from natural causes. The gods had “recalled” these individuals to the divine realm, so the grieving parents gave the children’s bodies back to the gods, incinerating them and burying them in the sacred precinct. “In return, the parents hoped that Ba‘al Hammon and Tanit would provide a replacement for the retroceded child—and this request was inscribed on a funeral stela” (Fantar 2000: 30).

However, there are serious problems with this argument (Stager and Greene 2000; Markoe 2000: 134–136; Xella et al. 2013; Smith 2014). Most of the stelae placed above the jars containing cremated remains refer to vows made to the gods rather than requests for future off-spring. They suggest that the cremated

offerings, animal or human, were given in fulfillment of those vows. Moreover, the presence of animal remains (mostly sheep and goats) is difficult to explain if the Tophets are burial places for infants who died naturally. “The animals were sacrificed to the gods, presumably in place of children. It is highly likely that the children unlucky enough not to have substitutes were also sacrificed and then buried in the Tophet” (Stager and Greene 2000: 31). Also, a recent study of the ages of cremated infants at Carthage showed that these ages were inconsistent with those of infants dying of natural causes (Smith et al. 2011: 859; Smith 2014). In addition, in an eighth-century BCE Phoenician inscription discovered in Cilicia, a Tyrian priest advises the local ruler to sacrifice his son or grandson as well as a lamb to alleviate a plague ravaging the area (Markoe 2000: 135). So most historians and archaeologists have continued to see the cremated remains in the Tophets as evidence that the Phoenicians sacrificed infants as votive offerings to their deities. While some infants may have been offered to the gods to prevent or atone for disasters or catastrophes, others were probably unwanted children given back to the gods, just as ancient Greeks exposed unwanted babies (Stager and Wolf 1984).

So far, all of the examples of Tophets have been found in the western colonies. However, the Tophet at Carthage goes back to the late eighth century BCE, not long after the founding of the city. This early appearance suggests that infant sacrifice was a practice brought with the colonists from their homeland rather than a new custom developed in the colonies. In addition, the biblical references to the burning of children are largely contemporary descriptions of eighth- through seventh-century Canaanite (and Judean) practices within the Levant, indicating that the custom was at home there. Finally, the Cilician inscription shows that infant sacrifice was practiced in Tyre during the eighth century BCE. Clearly, we do not yet fully understand many aspects of this rite, including its purpose, processes, timetable, and the socioeconomic groups that participated in it. But it was an aspect, probably a very ancient one, of Phoenician/Canaanite worship of Ba‘al and Ashtart (Tanit).

Small States of the Southern Levant

Israel and Judah

These two small nations had relatively minor political influence, economic significance, or military power in the ancient Near East. However, because

their religious concepts and scriptures became basic components of Western civilization, their history generally has merited extensive attention. So, in this book ancient Israel and Judah and the development of their religion are treated in a separate chapter ([Chapter 13](#)).

The Philistines

In the area to the west of Judah, along the southern Levantine coast, lived the Philistines, a people whom the Bible describes as the persistent enemies of the early Israelites. Several lines of evidence suggest that the Philistines were a group of foreigners who settled in this region at the end of the Bronze Age. Most scholars identify them with the group among the “Sea Peoples” known as the Peleset, whom Ramesses III defeated and resettled around 1175 BCE (see [Chapter 9](#)). The *Onomasticon of Amenope*, an Egyptian work of the late twelfth or early eleventh century BCE, reveals that Philistines as well as Shardana and Tjekker (other groups of Sea Peoples) were settled in Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ashdod. The eleventh century BCE *Report of Wenamun* also indicates that the Tjekker or Tjekel (Sikils, as some scholars identify them) controlled Dor at that time. In addition, some scholars have suggested that groups of the Danuna became the Israelite tribe of Dan, which, according to the Bible, was originally settled in the central coastal region before moving to the extreme northern portion of Israel. The Bible seems to refer to all of these different groups of Sea Peoples as Philistines, possibly because the Philistines were the predominant contingent with which the Israelites had contact.

Most of our historical information about the Philistines comes from the Hebrew Bible. According to the Bible, the Philistines ruled five major cities, forming a coalition of sorts. These were Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath. Each city was ruled by a *Seren* (“lord”?). Some linguists think this word is Indo-European and possibly related to *tyrannos* (“tyrant”), a word the Greeks borrowed from the Lydians of Asia Minor. The Philistines were excellent warriors, and a *seren* may have been primarily a warlord, leading his city’s well-trained, well-armed (and possibly professional) troops into battle. The area controlled by this confederation gradually expanded northward to the Jezreel valley and through the valley eastward to Beth-shean and the Jordan valley. The Philistines also gained dominance over much of the Shephelah (the western foothills of Palestine), an area largely settled by Proto-Israelites. The Bible suggests that it was this Philistine expansion into the Palestinian hills and the Jordan valley that forced the newly formed Israelite tribes to recognize their need for the unity and leadership provided by a monarchy.

The Philistines were excellent craftsmen and merchants. Their smiths made products of bronze and iron and, according to the Bible (1 Samuel 13:19), maintained a monopoly over the craft within Palestine. Archaeologists have uncovered twelfth-century BCE furnaces, slag, various bronze and iron artifacts, and other evidence of metalworking at Ekron, Ashdod, Tell Qasile, and other Philistine sites. They have also identified buildings where yarn was spun and textiles woven and dyed. In addition, the Philistines were also excellent farmers and horticulturists, producing choice varieties of wine and olive oil for trade. Based on the foreign pottery found at twelfth- and eleventh-century BCE Philistine sites, most of their early trade in these products was with Cyprus and Phoenicia.

Philistine culture was a blend of elements they brought with them from the Aegean and Cyprus and components they borrowed from the Egyptians and Canaanites among whom they settled. For example, in southern Palestine, their locally made Mycenaean IIIc:1b pottery developed into the characteristic Philistine bichrome (two-colored) ware. This bichrome pottery was still usually Mycenaean in shape and decoration, but Cypriot, Egyptian, and Canaanite elements appeared as well. The prevalence of pig bones at Philistine sites also suggests links with Aegean populations, either Mycenaean or Cypriot (Dothan and Dothan 1992; Stern 2014). Burial practices, however, reflect a variety of traditions. Some upper-class Philistines copied the Egyptian practice of placing the dead in coffins with human portraits on the lids, though the human depictions on Philistine clay coffins were much cruder than Egyptian ones. But at some sites, these anthropoid clay coffins were placed in hillside chamber tombs of a local Canaanite type that were similar to the tombs used by the Mycenaeans. Moreover, many Philistines were buried Canaanite-style in plain pits dug into the ground or in makeshift coffins (made by putting together the lower portions of two large storage jars).

Philistine religion displayed the mixture of cultural elements, as well. A Philistine temple found at Tell Qasile resembled small sanctuaries uncovered at Mycenae, Melos, and Cyprus, and it contained a bronze double axe of Aegean type. Initially, the Philistines' worship seems to have been centered on a mother goddess of Aegean type, for twelfth-century Aegean-style figurines were found at Ashdod, Ekron, and Tell Qasile. By the eleventh century, however, the main deity in the Philistine pantheon seems to have been Dagon, a male Canaanite god. The Philistines also worshipped the Canaanite deities Ba'al-zebul (Ba'al-zebul) and Asherat.

The original Philistine language and writing system is not certain. Several twelfth-century BCE stamp seals, one cylinder seal from Ashdod, and a few words and names preserved in the Bible and Assyrian texts are our only clues. The writing on the seals is of Aegean type, similar to the Linear A and Linear

B scripts of Crete and Greece and the Cypro-Mycenaean syllabic script of Cyprus (Dothan and Dothan 1992: 153). There are too few signs represented for it to be deciphered, however. The Philistine language originally may have been Indo-European, possibly related to Greek, Illyrian, or Lydian, but too little evidence has survived to allow any firm conclusions. Philistine names include both Semitic (e.g., Ya'ir) and non-Semitic (e.g., Goliath and Phicol) examples.

By the early part of the tenth century BCE, the originally distinctive Aegean cultural elements had largely disappeared. Philistine speech, material culture, and religion all had become essentially Canaanite in character. At Ekron, archaeologists have uncovered several seventh-century BCE dedicatory inscriptions written in a localized Phoenician script. These inscriptions are in Canaanite and dedicate objects to Asherat (or Asherah), Ba'al, and the shrine (using the Canaanite word for shrine). However, one long inscription dedicates a temple to a goddess Ptgyh, a name associated with the shrine of Delphi in Greece, and one of the kings listed seems to have an Aegean name (Noegel 2005; Gitin 2005). Archaeologists excavating the Philistine city of Gath found two other presumably Aegean names scratched in Canaanite letters on an early ninth-century BCE potsherd (Shanks (ed.) 2006). One of the names may be the equivalent of the name Goliath, the name of an earlier Philistine warrior from Gath mentioned in the Bible (1 Samuel 17, 2 Chronicles 21:19). Thus, the Philistines maintained at least some of their earlier traditions, and they continued to be considered a separate ethnic group, distinct from the Canaanites.

Even after being defeated by David, the Philistines maintained their hold on the coastal region of Palestine south of Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) and remained a major foe of Judah throughout the period of the Divided Monarchy. They also continued to control trade along the coastal road (called “the Way of the Land of the Philistines” in the Bible) that ran from Egypt to Megiddo and points further north. The major Philistine city-states managed to maintain their independence until the Assyrians conquered them in the latter part of the eighth century BCE.

Ammon, Moab, and Edom

The three small Transjordanian kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom arose to the east of Israel and Judah (see [Map 13.1](#) in [Chapter 13](#)) at approximately the same time, between the twelfth and eighth centuries BCE. Their populations all spoke languages closely related to Phoenician and Hebrew. The material culture of the Transjordanian peoples was also closely related to that of the

societies west of the Jordan River.

Ammon occupied the western edge of the Syrian Desert between the Jabbok River (the Wadi Zerqa) and the northern border of Moab (near the northern end of the Dead Sea). At times, Ammon expanded southward and gained control of northern Moab down to the Arnon River (the Wadi Mujib) near the middle of the eastern side of the Dead Sea. Rabbath-Ammon, its capital, had been occupied since the Early Bronze Age and had become a large city in Middle Bronze times. Although it declined in size during the Late Bronze Period, there was no break in its occupation or culture at the end of the Bronze Age. In fact, Ammon as a whole seems to have passed rather peacefully from the Bronze to the Iron Age. During the Late Bronze Period, most of the inhabitants of Ammon had been pastoralists, and sedentary occupation had been confined to the Baq'ah valley and the region around Rabbath-Ammon (present-day Amman, Jordan). During the twelfth century BCE, though, many small agricultural villages sprang up in Ammon as they did in the hills west of the Jordan River. In addition, towns or cities existed at sites such as Tell Sahab, Tell Umeiri, and the Amman Citadel, indicating a degree of economic, social, and political complexity. Most of Ammon's villages and towns were destroyed during the latter part of the Iron I Period (c. 1100–1000 BCE), and a large portion of the population reverted to seminomadic pastoralism for a time. The cause of these destructions remains unknown.

Several Ammonite sites were settled again during the tenth and ninth centuries BCE (the

Iron II A and B Periods), and Rabbath-Ammon probably had a rampart built around it. It definitely seems to have become the capital city of at least a tribal kingdom, if not a state, for archaeologists have found eighth- and seventh-century BCE portrait heads and statues of kings (see [Figure 10.6](#)), some wearing Egyptian-style crowns. Some archaeologists consider Ammon essentially a large city-state—Rabbath-Ammon with its surrounding towns, villages, and fields.



Figure 10.6 A Statue of Yerah-Azar, a Late Eighth- or Early Seventh-Century BCE Ammonite King

© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

The main deity of Ammon was a god named Milkom (from the Semitic root *mlk*, “to rule, to be king”). Milkom was probably the Ammonite form of the

West Semitic weather god, Ba'al Hadad. He seems to have been related to the Phoenician Melqart and possibly to Molech (or Malik), the deity to whom Judeans sacrificed children near Jerusalem.⁴

Moab was to the south of Ammon, occupying the entire eastern side of the Dead Sea. Its core territory was in the south, between the rivers Arnon (Wadi Mujib) and Zered (Wadi Hasa). Most of its cities and population, though, were in northern Moab from Aroer and Dibon just north of the Arnon River to around Medeba or Heshbon. Northern Moab was disputed territory, fought over and ruled at various times by Israelites, Ammonites, and Moabites. This area was important not only because of its agricultural potential and settlements, but also because the famous “King’s Highway” ran through it. This road was the main trade route from the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba to Rabbath-Ammon and northward to Damascus. The major Moabite cities—Kir (also called Kir-hareseth or Kir-Moab), Aroer, Dibon, Medeba, and Heshbon—all lay along this important route.

Israel probably controlled northern Moab under David and Solomon (c. 1005–931 BCE) and again during the reigns of Omri and Ahab (c. 885–852 BCE). Mesha, a vassal ruler of Moab who came to the throne around the middle of Ahab’s reign, ceased his annual tribute payments and seized northern Moab as soon as Ahab died (c. 852 BCE). A few years later, Jehoram of Israel (c. 851–841 BCE), supported by Judah and Edom, undertook a campaign to recapture Moab, marching around the southern end of the Dead Sea and attacking Moab from the south. However, Mesha took refuge in Kir (modern Kerak), a strongly fortified city that Jehoram could not conquer. Although he ravaged the countryside around Kir, Jehoram eventually had to retreat, and Moab maintained its independence. Mesha celebrated this and other victories by erecting a stele in Qarhoh, probably the sacred precinct or royal quarter of Dibon (modern Dhiban, Jordan). This black basalt monument, discovered at Dhiban in 1868 and now in the Louvre, is usually called the Mesha Stele or the Moabite Stone (see [Document 10.3](#)).

Document 10.3 The Victory Stele of Mesha, King of Moab

Moabite beliefs about Kemosh as indicated in Mesha’s inscription are very close to early Israelite ideas about Yahweh. Notice, also, that the Moabites, like the Israelites (and probably other peoples in the area), on occasion practiced the *herem* or “ban.” This custom consisted of dedicating captured goods and prisoners to a deity by destroying them in his or her honor. (This translation by W. Stiebing is based on [Albright

I am Mesha, son of Kemosh-[yat], King of Moab, the Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab for thirty years, and I reigned after my father. I made this high place for Kemosh in Qarhoh, [a high place of] salvation, because he delivered me from all the kings, and allowed me to have my way with all my adversaries. Omri, King of Israel, had oppressed Moab for years [lit., many days] because Kemosh was angry with his land. When Omri's son succeeded him, he too said, "I will humble Moab." In my days he said this, but I prevailed over him and his house, and Israel has totally perished forever. Omri had occupied the land of Medeba and [Israel] dwelt there in his time and half the time of his son, forty years; but Kemosh dwells there in my time. I built the city Ba'al-meon and made a reservoir in it, and I built the city Qaryaten.

Now the men of Gad had always dwelt in the land of Ataroth, for the king of Israel had built Ataroth for them. But I fought against the town and took it and slew all the people of the town as a satisfying offering for Kemosh and Moab. I brought back from there the *arel dwdh* (the royal altar?) and I dragged it before Kemosh in Keriath and settled there (in Ataroth) the men of Sharon and of Maharith.

Then Kemosh said to me, "Go, take Nebo from Israel!" So I went by night and fought against it from daybreak until noon, and took it. I slew all in it—seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and female slaves—for I had devoted them to Ashtar-Kemosh. I took from there the [cult vessels?] of Yahweh and dragged them before Kemosh. Now, the king of Israel had fortified Jahaz, and he occupied it while fighting against me, but Kemosh drove him out before me. Then I took two hundred men from Moab, all of them noblemen, and established them in Jahaz. Thus, I took possession of it and annexed it to (the district of) Dibon.

I built Qarhoh, the wall of the parkland and the wall of the citadel; I built its gates and I built its towers, and I built the royal palace and made both of the reservoirs for water inside the town.... I cut beams for Qarhoh with captives from Israel. I built Aroer, made the highway in the Arnon (valley) and rebuilt the city of Beth-bamoth, for it had been destroyed.

Mesha credits his victories to Kemosh (usually written Chemosh in English Bibles), Moab's national deity. Kemosh had been worshipped in the Near East for a long time before the appearance of the kingdom of Moab. The Ebla tablets from around 2300 BCE mention a god named Kamish, almost certainly an earlier form of the name Kemosh. The name of this deity is also found in the name of the city of Carchemish (*Kar-Kamish*, "Quay of the god Kamish"), indicating that he was worshipped there, as well (Mattingly 1992:896). Kemosh was probably a god of the underworld, for in an Assyrian list of gods he is equated with the Mesopotamian deity Nergal (Mattingly 1992: 896). He may have had a female counterpart and consort, a fertility goddess named Ashtar-Kemosh who is also mentioned in Mesha's Stele. However, it is not clear from context whether this is a goddess (possibly related to Ishtar and Ashtart) or another name for Kemosh himself. At a small wayside Moabite shrine near

Khirbet al-Mudayna in Jordan, archaeologists uncovered several female figurines holding flat circular objects (tambourines or sacrificial loaves of bread?). These may be representations of a goddess or goddesses, but they may also depict female cult participants (Daviau and Dion 2002).

Edom (also called Se'ir) occupied the territory south of the Zered River (Wadi Hasa) from the Arabian Desert to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. On the west, its border usually ran on an angle from the Gulf of Aqaba to the southeastern border of Judah somewhere in the vicinity of Kadesh-barnea (see [Map 13.1](#) in [Chapter 13](#)). The primary god of the Edomites was Qaus (later Qos) who seems to have been a weather god. Sedentary occupation did not occur in Edom as early as it did in Moab and Ammon. A few small farms or agricultural villages seem to have been created in northern Edom during the eleventh century BCE. The Edomites remained primarily seminomadic pastoralists until the eighth century BCE, however, when Bozrah (modern Buseirah), Punon (modern Feinan), Tell el-Kheleifeh, and a few other towns were founded. So probably Edom was not a “nation” or state before the eighth century BCE, and even then, it seems to have become only a chieftainship or tribal kingdom.

Edom was important to Israel and Judah (and later, to Assyria and Babylon) because of its copper mines in the Wadi Feinan region about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. In addition, “the King’s Highway,” an important route along which passed much of the overland trade from western Arabia, ran through eastern Edom. David and Solomon are supposed to have conquered Edom, but this probably just means that they secured the area of the mines and the main trade routes through the region. Solomon’s port, Ezion-geber, was built in Edomite territory somewhere along the northern part of the Gulf of Aqaba (possibly at Jezirat Far’oun). After Solomon’s death (c. 931 BCE), Edom gained its independence from Judah, but Jehoshaphat (c. 871–848 BCE) is supposed to have defeated an army of Edomites and Moabites and recaptured Ezion-geber. He built a fleet of ships there as Solomon had earlier, but before they could sail down the Gulf of Aqaba, they were wrecked in a storm. Following the failure of this expedition, Edom seems to have been able to maintain its freedom from Judah.

Small Kingdoms and Confederations in Arabia

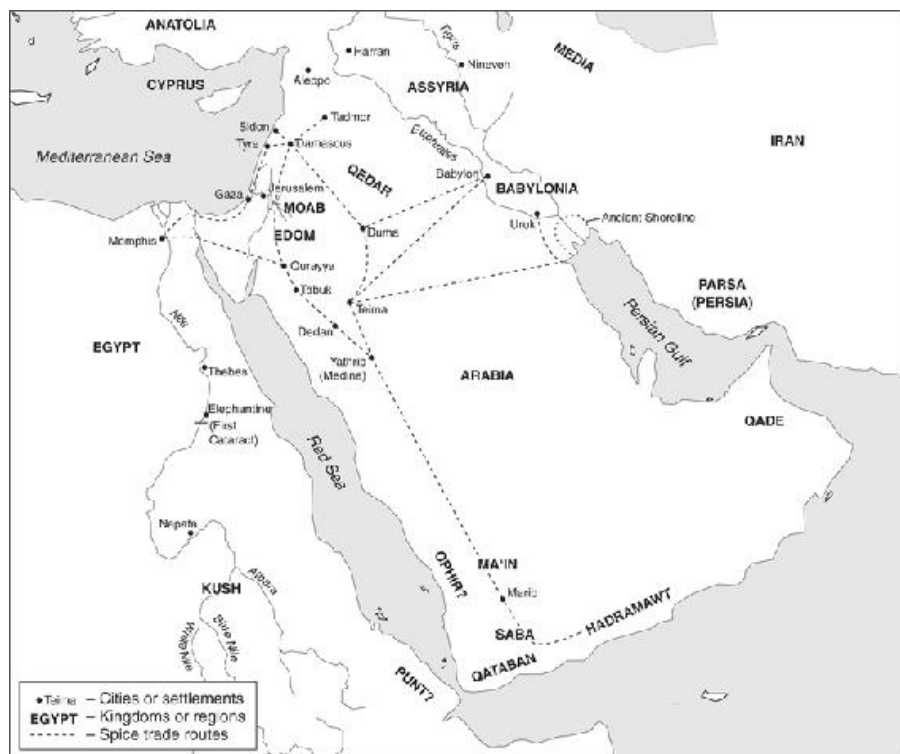
The earlier kingdoms of Dilmun and Magan along the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula had probably collapsed at the end of the third or during the second millennium BCE (see [Chapter 4](#)). They continued to be mentioned in

later Mesopotamian texts, but as legendary rather than real places. After hundreds of years in which the population seems to have reverted to a nomadic existence, towns reappeared in the northeastern area of modern Oman around 1000 BCE. Mesopotamians of that era knew a small kingdom in the area as Qade. Excavations in the United Arab Emirates have uncovered the desert towns of this kingdom and have shown this area to have been essential in the domestication of the camel (Magee 2014). Several small kingdoms and confederations of nomadic tribes also flourished in southwestern, western, and northern Arabia during the late second and early first millennia BCE and became significant participants in Near Eastern trade. From the mid-ninth century BCE onward, Mesopotamian and other texts refer to Arabian groups as “Arabs.” However, rather than representing an ethnic or linguistic designation, this term seems to have been used originally to mean “nomads” or “seminomads” (MacDonald 2000).

Ophir, the land with which Solomon and the Phoenicians are supposed to have traded, was probably located along the Red Sea coast of southwestern Arabia. The land of Saba (called Sheba in the Bible) probably was just to the south of Ophir in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula (in present-day Yemen, see [Map 10.4](#)). Other political entities in the area were Ma’in, Qataban, and Hadramawt. These areas may have been organized as small agricultural kingdoms, though it is also possible that they were originally only confederations of local farming and seminomadic tribes such as those described below. But by the tenth century BCE at the latest, Saba was a settled kingdom with extensive irrigation, monumental architecture in its capital at Marib, and its own alphabetic writing system (Kitchen 1994; Breton 1999; Wilkinson 2001). In fact, based on the extensive inscribed graffiti that have been found, many of the citizens of the western Arabian states probably were at least semi-literate, a situation that did not exist in most other parts of the ancient Near East.

Saba and the other southwestern Arabian kingdoms became prosperous largely through trade in extremely fine gold, spices, gems, and other precious commodities (Job 28:16; Psalm 72:15; Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 6:20; Ezekiel 27:22), some probably obtained from across the Red Sea in the area of Africa the Egyptians called Punt. The most important spices from this region were frankincense and myrrh, aromatic resins derived from trees that only grow in the southern and southwestern portion of the Arabian Peninsula and in northern Somalia on the east coast of Africa. Frankincense usually was burned to produce a sweet fragrance during religious rites, funerals, and special celebrations in the dwellings of wealthy individuals. Myrrh was a primary ingredient in oils and ointments used in perfumes, medicinal preparations and, especially, for embalming the dead. Camel caravans usually carried these

products, which commanded extremely high prices in Near Eastern markets, up the western coast of Arabia and thence to Egypt, the Levant, Syria, and Mesopotamia. From these areas, they were transported both east and west, becoming known and desired throughout the ancient world.



Map 10.4 Kingdoms and Confederations in First Millennium BCE Arabia

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

As in the southwestern coastal lands, there were settled agricultural communities at the major oases in western and northern Arabia. These oasis settlements, especially those at Yathrib (modern Medina), Dedan, Teima, Tabuk, Qurayya, and Duma (see [Map 10.4](#)), were important way stations on the incense routes from the south and shared in the wealth produced by that trade. They seem to have been the centers for confederations of nearby seminomadic tribes that provided camels and guides for caravans passing through the oases. These confederations also probably collected tolls or “protection money” from the caravans, raiding and looting those that refused to pay. The oases were also regional religious centers, housing local deities’ shrines that probably were places of pilgrimage during religious festivals. Though not based on an oasis, a similar confederation of related pastoral tribes known as Qedar seems to have controlled the trade routes between Duma and

Syria.

The Arabs first enter the historical record in the Assyrian sources. Shalmaneser III fought against Gindibu the Arab at the Battle of Qarqar (see [Document 10.1](#)). The wealth of Arabian camels, stones, and metals and the Arabs' importance for access to Egypt drew Assyrian intervention from the eighth century onwards. The Assyrians claimed to have collected tribute from several Arabian queens and kings and under Sennacherib at the end of the eighth century, Assyrians even attacked sites in Arabia. Although described as nomads, Mesopotamian and biblical texts refer to the leaders of the Arabian groups they encountered as "kings" or "queens." However, these were more like sheikhs with limited powers who, as in later times, probably led individual tribes. "Queens" played an especially prominent role among these "Arabs," but they (including possibly the "Queen" of Sheba who supposedly visited Solomon in the tenth century BCE) were probably priestesses of major Arabian deities (Mac-Donald 1995: 1364). In the eighth century BCE and earlier, these priestesses alone seem to have had the prestige and authority to unify tribes and their competing sheikhs around common shrines, creating the confederations that dominated the oases. The Arab "queens" not only ruled their confederations, but also on occasion even led them into battle. Frequent warfare with the Assyrians in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, though, probably led male leadership to become predominant among the Arabian confederations from the time of Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) onward. Nevertheless, the priestesses continued to exercise important unifying functions alongside the "kings" in later times.

Notes

1. It is also possible that Hadadezer was *briefly* succeeded by a son named Ben-Hadad at the time of Ahab. That would make the Ben-Hadad of Jehoahaz's time Ben-Hadad III. However, this scenario is not very likely.
2. Bactrian (two-humped) camels seem to have been domesticated as early as the third millennium BCE in central Asia while the dromedary (with only one hump) probably was domesticated during the second millennium BCE in Oman or southeastern Arabia (Zarins 1992). For a new study arguing that domesticated camels did not come into use in the Levant until the middle of the tenth century BCE, see Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef (2013).
3. Herodotus, IV, 42. Herodotus doubted the account because of the sailors' claim that as they sailed around Libya (Africa) from the Red Sea to the Atlantic, the sun was on their right hand. Since this observation is correct for an east-west journey in the Southern Hemisphere, most modern scholars accept the historicity of the voyage (e. g., Harden 1962: 170; Markoe 2000: 12, 51, 188).

4. Traditionally, Molech has been regarded as a deity. But some scholars argue that the word is related to Phoenician *molk*, which seems to be a term for a cultic child sacrifice rather than the name of the god to whom the child was sacrificed. See Heider (1992).

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Mesopotamian Supremacy

During the mid-eighth through the mid-sixth centuries, two great Mesopotamian empires successively dominated the Near East. First, from 744 through 627, Assyria grew into a huge empire that became the first to exercise control over both centers of early civilization, Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Medes and Assyria's traditional enemy, Babylon, though, eventually destroyed this empire. During the first half of the sixth century the Chaldean dynasty of Babylon gained control of most of the former Neo-Assyrian Empire's territory and made Babylon the most important city in the Near East once again. The Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Periods witnessed many significant cultural developments, perhaps most importantly, providing the foundations for later mathematical astronomy.

Assyrian Domination (744–627 BCE)

Reestablishment and Expansion of Assyrian Power (744–681 BCE)

Assyria experienced famines, epidemics, semi-independent provincial governors and, finally, an insurrection during the forty years before Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE, see [Table 11.1](#)) became king. In addition, Urartu had extended its power and made alliances with a people called the Mannaeans (or Mannai) in the Zagros Mountains and with various Aramaean kingdoms in Syria. In southern Mesopotamia, the Chaldeans, with Elamite help, were trying to gain control of Babylon. Thus, Assyrian interests were threatened on all sides. A revolt put Tiglath-pileser on the throne, so possibly he was a usurper, but he proved to be a resourceful king and gifted military commander. He reorganized the army, defeated Assyria's enemies in the Zagros and Syria, and attacked Urartu directly, penetrating all the way to the capital city, Tushpa, on

Lake Van. Though he failed to take Tushpa, he weakened Urartu and conquered many of her allies.

Assyrian kings felt an “obligation to ‘extend the borders’ of Ashur’s rule” (Bedford 2009: 51). So, Tiglath-pileser renewed Assyrian expansion westward. He forced Tyre and Sidon to continue paying tribute to Assyria, and crushed a coalition of Philistine, Judean, Ammonite, Moabite, and Edomite forces. He also annexed Damascus and rebellious Israel’s Galilean and Transjordanian territories as Assyrian provinces.

Then, when a Chaldean chieftain briefly took possession of Babylon, Tiglath-pileser III invaded southern Mesopotamia and regained control of the area. Instead of placing a vassal on Babylon’s throne, he made himself king of Babylon under the name Pulu (which is written Pul in 2 Kings 15:19 and 1 Chronicles 5:26). Control of Babylon turned out to be a particularly thorny issue in Assyrian politics until the end of the empire. Tiglath-pileser also resumed and enlarged the practice of deporting subject populations, moving vast numbers of people from one part of the empire to another. This program of forcible resettlement, especially of Aramaeans, became standard Assyrian policy under his successors. (See the later section “Administration of the Empire.”) His victories and administrative reforms inaugurated the era of Assyrian dominance in the Near East.

Table 11.1 Chronology of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Baby Ionian Kings

<i>Assyria</i>	<i>Babylon</i>
Tiglath-pileser III (744–727)	Nabonassar (Nabu-nasir, 747–734) Pulu (= Tiglath-pileser III, 732–727)
Shalmaneser V (726–722)	Ululaya (= Shalmaneser V, 726–722)
Sargon II (721–705)	Merodach-baladan II (Marduk-apla-iddina II, 721–710)
	Sargon as Viceroy (709–705)
Sennacherib (704–681)	3 Kings (703–700)
	Ashur-nadin-shumi (699–694)
	2 Kings (693–689)
	Esarhaddon as Viceroy (688–681)
Esarhaddon (680–669)	Esarhaddon as King (680–669)
Ashurbanipal (668–c. 627)	Shamash-shum-ukin (668–648)
	Kandalanu (647–627)
4 Kings (c. 626–609)	Chaldean Dynasty
Conquest of Assyria by Medes and Babylonians (614–609)	Nabopolassar (Nabu-apla-usur, 626–605)
	Nebuchadnezzar II (Nabu-kudurri-usur II, 604–562)

Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk, 561–560)

Neriglissar (Nergal-shar-usur, 559–556)

Labashi-Marduk (556)

Nabonidus (Nabu-na'id, 555–539)

Note: All dates are BCE. The most important rulers' names are printed in boldface.

Little is known about the brief reign of Tiglath-pileser III's son and successor, Shalmaneser V (726 to 722 BCE), except for his destruction of Israel. When Hoshea, Israel's king, revolted, Shalmaneser ravaged the remaining Israelite territory and besieged Samaria, the capital city, for three years. He probably captured the city as the Bible (2 Kings 17:4–6; 18:9–10) and the Babylonian Chronicle claim, but died (possibly by assassination) soon after its fall. His successor, Sargon II (721–705 BCE), who probably usurped the throne from his brother, claimed the conquest of Samaria for himself. He may have been the general who was directing the siege on behalf of Shalmaneser. In any case, Sargon seems to have carried out the deportation of a large portion of the population and the division of the country into four Assyrian provinces: Dor, Megiddo, Gilead, and Samaria.

Upon his accession, Sargon II faced problems at home as well as in the provinces. The citizens of the city of Ashur had been protesting some of Shalmaneser's policies, and their disturbances possibly helped cause his replacement by Sargon. To calm the unrest, Sargon reinstated the traditional exemptions from forced labor and from certain taxes for residents of Ashur. While these internal affairs occupied his attention, rebellion broke out in Syria and Gaza, encouraged by promises of Egyptian support. Sargon crushed the Aramaeans at Qarqar then marched southward against Gaza. The Egyptian forces fled, leaving the ruler of Gaza to suffer torture and death at Sargon's hands. Meanwhile, a Chaldean chieftain named Marduk-apla-iddina II (also known as Merodach-baladan from Isaiah 39:1 in the Bible) had seized the throne of Babylon with Elamite support. In 720, Sargon led an army down the east side of the Tigris to restore Assyrian control over southern Mesopotamia, but an Elamite army met him in battle and forced him to turn back. It would be ten years before he was able to concern himself again with the situation in Babylonia.

In the meantime, he had to deal with continued unrest in northern Syria and Anatolia, generally stirred up by Urartu and Phrygia. Sargon conquered Carchemish in 717 and made it into an Assyrian province. Over the next few years, he destroyed the Neo-Hittite kingdoms of Que (Cilicia), Gurgum, Milid, and Kummuhu and annexed their territories. He seized about half of Tabal's

land as well. Moreover, Urartu and its allies, the Medes, had engineered the overthrow of a pro-Assyrian king in Mannaea, a region southeast of Lake Urmia. Sargon invaded Mannaea, killed the pro-Urartian ruler and installed as king the former monarch's brother. Undaunted, in subsequent years, Rusa I, King of Urartu, continued to raid into Mannaea and cause other problems along Assyria's northeastern frontier. So, in the summer of 714, Sargon launched a major attack on Urartu. The Urartians expected him, so their forces were guarding the mountain passes between Assyria and Urartu. However, Sargon marched east through the Zagros, received tribute from the Medes, then advanced northward through Mannaea to the southwestern shore of Lake Urmia. Somewhere in that region, he met and decimated an Urartian army trying to block his entry into Urartu (see [Document 11.1](#)). As news of the Assyrian victory spread through the country, King Rusa fled into the mountains, leaving Sargon unopposed as he marched through Urartu looting and destroying. Before returning home, Sargon stormed the border fortress of Musasir, sacked the city and its temple-sanctuary, and carried off a massive hoard of precious metals and bronze objects in addition to the statue of Urartu's national god Haldi.

Document 11.1 Sargon's Letter to Ashur

In a literary composition dedicated to the god Ashur, Sargon extols his valor and accomplishments in his monumental conquest of Urartu in 714 BCE. It was probably read aloud as part of a ceremony celebrating his triumph. It is typical of Assyrian inscriptions and provides insight into the imperial aspirations of the Neo-Assyrian kings. In this "letter" he claims the assault is retribution for Urartian wrongs. It also shows the ingenuity and strength of the Assyrian army as they cross torrential rivers and cut roads through the mountains. The translation is by Sarah Melville in Chavalas (ed.), 2006: 337–340.

May it be exceedingly well with Ashur, father of the gods, great lord, who dwells in Ehursaggalkurkura!... It is exceedingly well with Sargon, the high priest, the servant who fears your great divinity, and his camp.

In the month of Dumuzi (July), the one that makes firm the regulations, the month of the powerful, foremost son of Enlil, the overpowering one of the gods, Ninurta,... I impetuously crossed the upper Zab in full flood.... The mountain, Simirriu, the highest peak of the mountains which lunges up like the point of a spear, raising its head above the mountains, the dwelling of the mistress of the gods, whose summit leans up to heaven, whose root reaches down in the midst of the underworld, and (where) like the backbone of a fish, there is no going side by side, its ascent on all sides is difficult, on whose sides gullies and mountain ravines are deeply cut and the

act of looking at it is shrouded in terror, unfit for the ascent of chariots or for horses to show their mettle, its access was too difficult for foot soldiers, through the understanding and wide knowledge which Ea and the mistress of the gods decreed for me, they enabled me to destroy the land of my enemy. I had my soldiers carry strong copper picks and they cut off the jagged parts of the steep mountain like limestone and they raised a path. I took (my place) at the front of my army and I caused my chariots, cavalry, battle troops, the ones who accompany me, to fly over its loftiness like valiant eagles. I made the corvee troops and scouts follow them. Camels and pack donkeys like mountain-bred goats leaped its height.

From the Zagros, Sargon then moved into Urartu and defeated King Rusa. The rest of the letter is concerned with the return journey and the sacking of the Temple of Musasir.

On my return journey, Urzana of Musasir, doer of wrong and crimes, breaker of the oath of the gods, who did not submit to my lordship, the dangerous mountain man who sinned against the loyalty oath of Ashur, Shamash, Nabu, and Marduk and revolted against me, he interrupted the advance of my return journey and my expedition by (withholding) his ample gifts; he did not kiss my feet. He withheld tribute.... In the anger of my heart, I caused all of my chariots, my abundant cavalry and my whole camp to take the road to Assyria.... At the valuable consent of the hero, Shamash, who caused the entrails to be inscribed with favorable omens, which means going at my side, with one chariot alone at my feet, and one thousand of my furious horsemen, soldiers, bowmen, shieldbearers, and spearmen, my fierce heroes, trained for the heroism of battle, I took the road to Musasir....

Because Urzana, the king, their prince, did not fear the command of Ashur, threw off the yoke of my lordship and forgot to serve me, I planned to carry off the people of that city and I ordered that the god, Haldi, the protector of Urartu, be brought out. Triumphantly, I caused him [Urzana] to take his seat by his city gate; his sons, his daughters, his people, seeds of his father's house, I plundered. With 6,110 people, 12 mules, 380 donkeys, 525 cattle, 1,235 sheep I counted (them) and I made them enter inside the wall of my camp. I entered triumphantly into Musasir, the dwelling of Haldi, as a lord I dwelled in the palace, the abode of Urzana. The storerooms, piled up with abundant riches, I opened the sealings of their treasure.

Finally, by 710, Sargon was able to turn his attention to Babylon once again. The time was ripe, for many of the old cities of the south were begging for Assyrian intervention because various Chaldean tribes, allies of Merodach-baladan, had been extorting money from them and interfering with the free flow of trade in the area. At Sargon's approach at the head of a strong army, the Chaldean ruler of Babylon retreated to the refuge of his homeland, Bit-Yakin, on the shores of the Persian Gulf. There, with the aid of the other Chaldean tribes, he held out for two years, and when his principal city, Dur-Yakin fell, he eluded capture and took refuge in Elam. In the midst of this campaign, Sargon had received the submission of the cities of northern Babylonia including Babylon itself. At the New Year Festival, he "took the

hands of Bel (Marduk),” becoming the ruler of Babylon as Tiglath-pileser III and Shalmaneser V had been. Rather than call himself “king,” however, Sargon chose to use the ancient Assyrian title “Viceroy (of the God)” in Babylonia. He crowned his conquest of Babylonia by deporting a large number of its Aramaean and Chaldean inhabitants (108,000 according to his annals).

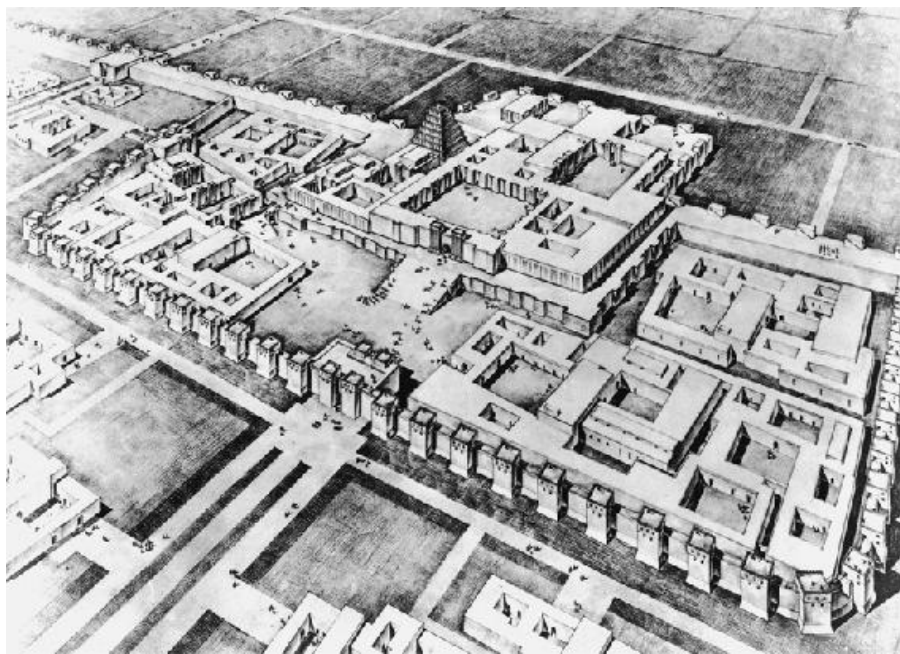


Figure 11.1 Reconstruction of the Citadel of Dur-Sharrukin

© Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

In 717 BCE, while beginning campaigns against Carchemish and the north Syrian states, Sargon had launched another project, the construction of a new capital city at a previously unoccupied site. He named this city, located about fourteen miles northeast of Nineveh, Dur-Sharrukin (“Sargon’s Fortress,” modern Khorsabad). Thousands of deportees and artisans worked on this city, completing it in only ten years (see [Figure 11.1](#)). Funded by the looting of Assyria’s enemies, Dur Sharrukin’s temples and palaces were to eclipse in scale and quality all of the former Assyrian works. Like his predecessor, Ashurnasirpal, Sargon decorated his palace with large sculpted reliefs, this time with vivid portrayals in narrative form of his victories over his enemies. The statues of the gods were moved into their temples in 707 BCE and Sargon took up residence, though he did not officially dedicate the city until the following year.

Sargon was not able to enjoy Dur-Sharrukin’s beautiful sanctuaries and

palaces for long. In 705 BCE, while campaigning in Tabal, he died in battle. The agents of his death may have been the Cimmerians, warlike invaders from southern Russia or the Ukraine, who had crossed the Caucasus Mountains and invaded Urartu. One group of Cimmerians went eastward and raided for a time in northwestern Iran before settling among the Mannaeans and becoming allies of the Medes. Others moved westward into Anatolia, attacking Tabal. Even though Sargon perished, his army prevented the Cimmerians from turning back toward Syria or Assyria. They eventually established themselves in Asia Minor.

Sargon's son Sennacherib became king (704–681 BCE). Like "Sargon," the name "Sennacherib" is derived from the Bible. In Akkadian, this king's name was Sin-ahhe-eriba, "(the God) Sin has replaced the brothers." Sennacherib felt that his father's ignoble death in battle (his corpse could not even be recovered for the proper burial rites), showed that he must have angered the gods, for Mesopotamians generally interpreted disasters as divine punishments. So the new king shifted the capital from Dur-Sharrukin to the ancient city of Nineveh, which he almost completely rebuilt. He constructed a magnificent palace for himself atop the old city mound (now called Tell Kuyunjik) that became the new capital's citadel. He constructed an arsenal and other public buildings nearby (at present-day Tell Nebi Yunus). He more than doubled the city's area and surrounded it with a double-fortification wall and a moat. In order to enlarge Nineveh, Sennacherib had to change the course of a small tributary of the Tigris that formerly ran next to the city. He built a dam on this stream and diverted it so that it emptied into the Tigris north of his new walls. He also constructed a 30-mile-long canal complete with an aqueduct over a valley to bring fresh mountain water to the city from the northern hills. Some of the dams and weirs he built to irrigate the fields and orchards around Nineveh have been repaired and are still in use. Moreover, north of Nineveh, Sennacherib created a large royal botanical park containing many types of exotic plants and trees, including cotton plants. The cotton plant had been domesticated in India in the third millennium BCE, but as far as we know, this was the first time it was introduced into the Near East.

For some unknown reason, perhaps because he was preoccupied with building his new capital, Sennacherib failed to install himself as king or viceroy of Marduk in Babylon. For two years, Babylon had no official ruler, and Sargon's old enemy, Merodach-baladan, seized this opportunity to again proclaim himself king of Babylon. As earlier, he was supported by Elam, the Aramaean tribes living east of the Tigris, and the Chaldean tribes. Sennacherib led his armies southward in 703 BCE and overwhelmed the forces of Merodach-baladan, but once again, the Chaldean leader escaped to the marshes in the south. Though he could not catch the ringleader, Sennacherib rounded up

many of the rebels and claimed to have deported 208,000 of them to Assyria.

Soon after Sargon's death, revolts also broke out in the west, encouraged by Merodachbaladan and Shabako, the second pharaoh of the new Nubian dynasty in Egypt. Hezekiah, king of Judah, against the advice of the prophet Isaiah, joined Sidon, Tyre, Ashkelon, Ekron, and possibly Ammon, Moab, and Edom in refusing to pay tribute. By the time Sennacherib realized the seriousness of the situation in the west, he was also being challenged by Merodach-baladan's seizure of Babylon. In 701 BCE, though, Sennacherib was free to launch a major assault against the Levantine rebels. He first crushed Sidon and Tyre (at that time under one rule), forcing their king to flee to Cyprus, and the news of the defeat of these great cities led to the rapid submission of Gubal (Byblos), Arvad, Ashdod, Ammon, Moab, and Edom. Tyre's mainland territory was taken away and given to Sidon, whose throne was given to a pro-Assyrian ruler. Sennacherib then moved down the coast, conquering the rebellious Philistine towns as he went. At Eltekeh, he routed an Egyptian army sent to aid the rebels, then retook the nearby city of Ekron. He executed some of the rebellious leaders of the captured cities, deported others, and replaced them with rulers friendly toward Assyria. Then, with Philistia under control, Sennacherib invaded Judah from the west. First, he had to capture the heavily fortified city of Lachish (see [Figure 11.2](#)), which controlled the approach to Jerusalem. Then, Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem, later boasting that he made Hezekiah "a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage." But Jerusalem did not fall. Hezekiah had strengthened its fortifications and improved its water system in anticipation of a siege. But in the end, the Judean king realized the futility of continuing his resistance and offered to surrender and pledge his future loyalty. Sennacherib accepted Hezekiah's capitulation and marched home, but only after giving some of Judah's territory to the new Philistine kings and making Judah pay a huge indemnity.

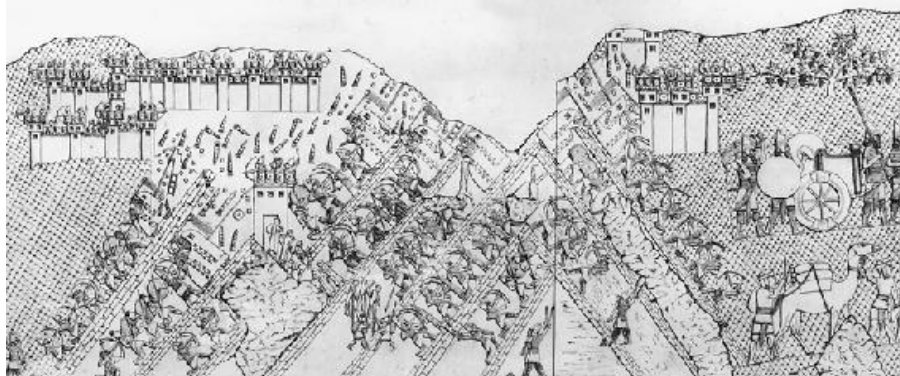


Figure 11.2 Sennacherib's Assault of the Judean City of Lachish (drawing of a bas-relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh)

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Sennacherib may have been willing to retain Hezekiah as a vassal rather than commit to a lengthy siege of Jerusalem because of disturbing news about southern Mesopotamia. The person he had appointed as vassal king of Babylon was having difficulty controlling his territory, and Merodach-baladan seems to have been stirring up the Chaldeans in Bit-Yakin again. So, in 700 BCE, Sennacherib again invaded Babylonia, imposed order, and placed one of his own sons, Ashur-nadin-shumi, on the throne (699–694 BCE). However, even though Merodach-baladan died in Elam soon afterward, the south was not pacified. Sennacherib had to mount campaigns in 694 BCE and again from 690 to 689 BCE against Elamites (who carried off Ashur-nadin-shumi and presumably murdered him), the Sealand, Bit-Yakin, and assorted Chaldean tribes. In retaliation, Sennacherib sacked Babylon, burned it, dumped its rubble into one of its canals, and diverted water over the ruins.

The Empire at Its Zenith (680–627 BCE)

In 681 BCE, while he was praying in a temple, Sennacherib was stabbed to death by some of his sons who seem to have been angry because of the choice of their younger brother, Esarhaddon (Ashur-aha-iddina in Akkadian, “Ashur has Given a Brother”), as crown prince. The designated heir, Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE), quickly returned to Nineveh and led his army against his brothers.

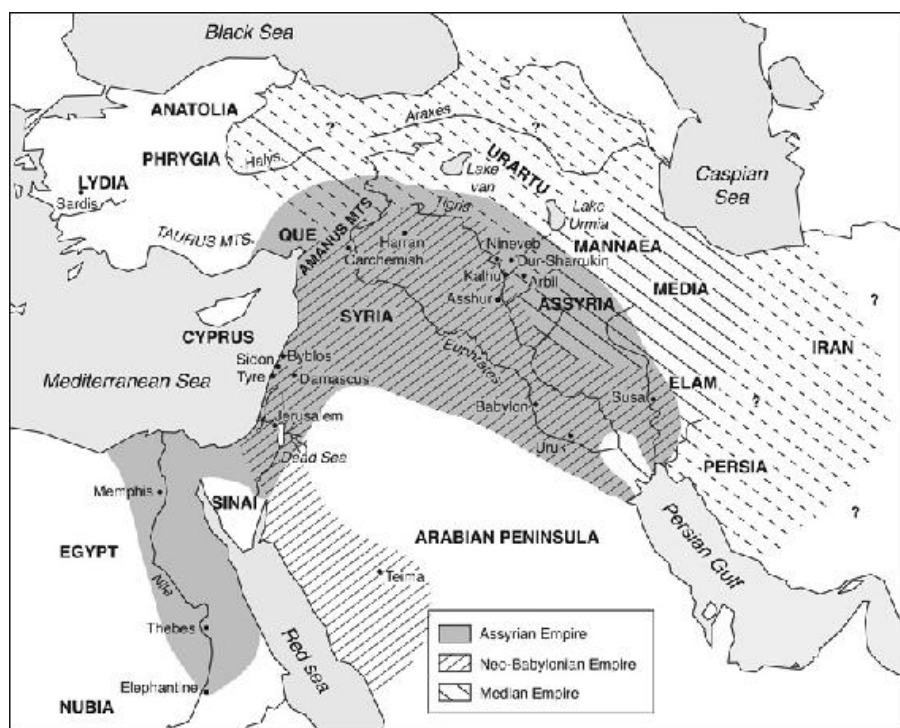
Deserted by most of their own forces, the patricides fled to Urartu, and Esarhaddon received the support of the army and the people of Assyria. One of his first acts as king was to order the rebuilding and enlargement of the city of Babylon, which he says he did on the command of the gods of Babylon. He allowed the remnants of the old population to return and restored their lands and privileges. Esarhaddon claims to have personally carried the first basket for the temple of Marduk, along the model of the Sumerian kings of old. The reconstruction of the city took Esarhaddon's entire reign. When it was complete, however, just after Esarhaddon's death, the statues of Babylon's gods that had been taken to Assyria were returned to their temples. Esarhaddon's pro-Babylonian policies won him considerable support in the south, so much so that he was able to use the area as a base for his expedition into Iran in 676 BCE.

Early in his reign, Esarhaddon was confronted with further incursions of the Cimmerians at the edges of the empire, possibly joined with a related seminomadic people of the steppe, the Scythians. Esarhaddon was clearly worried about the Scythians and Cimmerians, as he inquired about them in several oracle texts. As a precaution, he also married off his daughter to a Scythian leader. The Scythians and Cimmerians continued to ravage areas in Anatolia during the seventh century BCE. In 679, they provoked the Assyrians in Tabal and Cilicia. Three years later, they invaded and destroyed the Phrygian kingdom, killing King Mita (Midas). They were finally defeated by the Lydians and were gradually absorbed into the Anatolian population. The kingdom of Lydia took possession of the former Phrygian territory and developed into a power in Asia Minor.

Around the same time, some tribes of Medes seem to have been forming alliances or small kingdoms and growing stronger. To halt this growth of Median power and secure the supply of horses previously provided by the Medes, Esarhaddon launched a series of cavalry raids into Iran from 676 to 675 BCE. He penetrated central Iran as far as the desert east of Teheran, attacked the Medes and made several of their chieftains into Assyrian vassals, secured allies in the central Zagros Mountains, and most importantly, made a peace treaty with the king of Elam.

The Levant had remained relatively peaceful after Sennacherib's campaign in 701 BCE except for a revolt by Sidon in alliance with a few north Syrian coastal cities just after the Scythian invasion. In 677 BCE, Esarhaddon sacked Sidon, captured (and later executed) the rebellious kings, and established an Assyrian fortress near Sidon to keep the peace. Despite the Assyrian military presence, the ruler of Tyre, secure in his island fortress and incited by the Egyptian pharaoh Taharqa, revolted (probably in 676 BCE). Esarhaddon was busy with his Iranian campaign at that time, but in 675 BCE he determined to

punish Egypt, the source of most of the unrest in the west. Ever since the Nubian kings of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty gained control of Egypt around 725 BCE, they had stirred up revolts in the Levant in hopes of expelling Assyria from an area traditionally considered an Egyptian sphere of influence. Esarhaddon's first invasion of Egypt was thwarted by a sandstorm, but the following year he returned and captured the major fortified sites in the Delta. He also secured his flank and rear by winning the support of the Arabs and initiating the siege of Tyre. Then, in 671 BCE, he struck Egypt again, taking Memphis, the Egyptian capital, and forcing Pharaoh Taharqa to flee to the south. Esarhaddon deported the royal family to Assyria, reorganized the country, removing old officials and putting new ones in place. For the first time in history, the same person ruled both Egypt and Mesopotamia (see [Map 11.1](#)). However, Assyrian control over Egypt was only temporary. Two years later, Taharqa retook Memphis and stirred up rebellion throughout the Delta. Esarhaddon was leading another campaign to reconquer Egypt when he became ill and died in Syria.



Map 11.1 The Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Median Empires at Their Greatest Extent (671–655 BCE)

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

In 672 BCE, in an effort to bring stability to the royal succession, Esarhaddon

proclaimed his son Ashurbanipal as crown prince of Assyria and another son, Shamash-shum-ukin, as crown prince of Babylon and made his vassals swear loyalty to his successors. Though it was clear that Shamash-shum-ukin was to be subordinate to his brother, such an arrangement might have led to a disputed succession and open conflict between the brothers. However, thanks to the efforts of the queen mother, Naqia, it did not, at least not for some time; both men peacefully assumed their posts soon after their father's death. After making sure everything was in order at home and securing the submission of the king of Tyre, Ashurbanipal (Ashur-ban-apli, "Ashur Is Creator of the Son," 668–c. 627) sent an army to regain control of Egypt. The Assyrians defeated Taharqa again and recaptured Memphis, but as before, the wily pharaoh avoided capture and took refuge in his native Kush (Nubia). Ashurbanipal made Nekau (better known as Necho from Greek accounts), ruler of the city of Sais in the Delta, his viceroy in Egypt. Taharqa died in 664 BCE, and his successor as king of Kush, Tanutamun, took up the crusade to liberate Egypt from Assyrian domination. Tanutamun gained control of all the major Egyptian centers from Aswan to Memphis and killed Necho, but his victories were short-lived. Ashurbanipal's large army, stationed in the Delta, counterattacked and marched all the way to Thebes. The Assyrians sacked the ancient Egyptian religious center and burned it to the ground. Ashurbanipal named Necho's son, Psamtik I (Psammetichus in Greek), as vassal king of Egypt, initiating the Saite Dynasty (Dynasty 26). The Saite Dynasty would outlive the Assyrian Empire and carry out a cultural renaissance within Egypt.

For seven years after Ashurbanipal's suppression of Egypt, the empire was relatively calm, with only a couple of minor campaigns against the Mannaeans, Medes, and Elam. However, in 653 BCE, the storm broke. Tept-Humban-Inshushinak (Teumman in Assyrian texts), the new king of Elam, aided by an Aramaean tribe of the southern Zagros Mountains, attacked Mesopotamia. The Assyrians drove back the invaders and killed the Elamite king in battle. His head was cut off, paraded through several cities, and then taken to Nineveh. While Ashurbanipal was occupied with this conflict, Psammetichus rebelled in Egypt and, aided by Ionian and Carian mercenaries, drove the Assyrian troops out of the country. Ashurbanipal was unable to respond, for almost as soon as he had settled affairs in Elam and punished the Zagros tribes, his brother led a revolt in Babylonia. It took four years for Ashurbanipal to quell the rebellion, but in 648 BCE, he retook Babylon. Shamash-shum-ukin committed suicide, throwing himself into the flames of his burning palace.

The Elamites, despite their recent defeat, had supported Shamash-shum-ukin's rebellion, so Ashurbanipal brought Elam back under control in 648 BCE. Nevertheless, he was unable to keep a pro-Assyrian ruler on Elam's throne,

and the Elamites continued to stir up the Chal-dean tribes in Babylonia. His patience at an end, Ashurbanipal invaded Elam once more, and between 647 and 645 BCE, he totally devastated the land. He looted and leveled all the major cities, including Susa. He burned Susa's temples and carried off or destroyed the statues of its gods. He even desecrated the tombs of earlier Elamite rulers and carried their bones to Assyria to subject their spirits, deprived of food and drink offerings, to eternal restlessness and torment. He sowed salt over Elam's agricultural land, magically cursing it so that nothing would grow there. Along with vast amounts of booty, he took tens of thousands of Elamites back to Assyria. He so thoroughly destroyed Elam that it would never again threaten Mesopotamia. Ironically, however, Elam's destruction paved the way for a new threat to Assyria: the Medes. A Median chieftain named Khshathrita, known as Phraortes to the Greeks (c. 647–625 BCE), rose to the fore and was quick to fill the power vacuum along Mesopotamia's eastern border.

Ashurbanipal's inscriptions do not go beyond 639 BCE, so little is known of the last decade or so of his reign. Even the date of his death is not certain, though calculations based on an inscription indicate that it occurred around 627 BCE. Probably because of Ashurbanipal's preoccupation with Babylonia and Elam, he made no attempt to regain Egypt. Due to the worsening conditions in Assyria, Psammetichus even became an ally, probably by promising not to interfere in Levantine affairs. Herodotus, a fifth-century Greek historian, indicates that in the latter part of Ashurbanipal's reign, Medes and then Scythians invaded Assyria, with the Scythians reaching all the way to Palestine. Whether this account is accurate or not, Assyria seems to have experienced a serious decline during Ashurbanipal's final years. He does not seem to have had much time to relax and enjoy the luxurious palace he had erected at Nineveh.

Neo-Assyrian Society and Culture

The King, Crown Prince, and Queen

The Neo-Assyrian king, like earlier Mesopotamian rulers, was the viceroy of the gods, their representative on earth and the intermediary between them and human beings. Despite his great power, the Assyrian king was not deified as was the Egyptian pharaoh. However, the king embodied god-like attributes, enabling him to make the proper decisions and fulfill the will of Ashur, the

Assyrian national deity, and the rest of the gods. His emulation of the gods was essential, for the country's well-being depended upon the king's personal virtues and his proper execution of the rituals associated with kingship. Some scholars emphasize this aspect of Assyrian kingship so much that they see the king as a semi-divine being (e.g., Parpola 1993: 167–168, 1999). In theory, the king was the state—an absolute ruler whose decisions could not be questioned and whose advisors and ministers were just his “servants.”

In practice, though, the king's authority was partially limited by tradition, the power of the Assyrian landed nobility, and the necessity of having his major decisions approved by the gods. A king was expected to honor customary individual and group property rights, previous grants of tax exemptions, and other legal precedents. Failing to do so could, and did, lead to rebellion and upheaval. The growth of the empire during and after the time of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE) necessitated the appointment of many new governors and officials, somewhat lessening the authority of the noble families that had held many of the highest offices as their hereditary right. Nevertheless, because army officers, governors, high officials, and queens came from the landed nobility, this class remained a power to be reckoned with. Members of this group engineered or supported the revolutions and coups that often bedeviled Assyrian monarchs. Finally, Assyrian kings made no important decisions and undertook no significant actions without first consulting the will of the gods as expressed through omens. Esarhaddon seems to have been especially diligent with divination as many political omen texts belong to his reign. There was a council of sixteen expert astrologers and diviners of all types whose job it was to advise the king on the meaning of the omens. Nevertheless, the Assyrian king was not a puppet to be manipulated by those who interpreted the omens. As Georges Roux has remarked (1992: 344), usually “astrologers and diviners gave the king a general set of circumstances within which he felt free to ‘do as he wished,’ and there were even cases when he asked for several omens in succession until he obtained one that fitted his plans.”

Like the Egyptian pharaoh, the Assyrian king preserved the divinely ordered world against chaos and enforced the principles of law handed down by the gods. The king not only ruled in place of the gods on earth, but he also represented humans before the deities. He was the chief priest of the land and carried out the major rituals of the cultic calendar. After the conquest of Babylon, the king performed the ritual obligations of the Babylonian king, particularly the *akitu* festival (see Neo-Babylonian Culture section below). When a solar eclipse occurred, it was perceived as an omen that the king was going to die. At such times, a substitute king was chosen and “reigned” for a brief time, participating in rituals of atonement while the real king and his

sons were confined to the palace. At the end of this time, the substitute king was killed (thus fulfilling the prophecy) and the real king was reestablished on his throne. The possible existence of a similar practice in Old Babylonian times was mentioned previously in [Chapter 6](#), but it is well attested during the Neo-Assyrian era.

Though Assyrian rulers had several wives, only one was designated as the queen (the *sekallu*, “[lady] of the palace”) at a given time. How she was chosen is unknown, though there are indications that queens were usually drawn from the principal noble families. Love may have played a role. An inscription of Sennacherib describes how he built a palace of love, joy, and pleasure for his queen Tashmetum-sharrat, “beloved wife, whose features Belet-ili (the goddess of creation) has made more beautiful than all other women” (adapted from Radner 2012: 692). The fantastically wealthy tombs of Neo-Assyrian queens excavated at Kalhu included queens with West Semitic or Aramaic names. Whether these women were acquired through diplomatic marriages or were captured and deported nobles is not known.



Figure 11.3 Gold and Lapis Encrusted Crown of a Queen, Nimrud Tombs.

© Barry Iverson/Alamy stock photo.

Some Assyriologists argue that the first wife to bear the king a son became the queen and her son the crown prince (e.g., Grayson 1992: 750). This view assumes, though, that the king’s eldest son automatically became crown prince, which does not seem to be the case. So, this theory is not widely held and is unlikely. Instead, when the crown prince became king, his mother was

designated as “Mother of the King.”

The queen had special quarters in the royal palaces and had a large household and estates of her own. Her personal wealth and prestige are amply illustrated by the spectacular goods buried in the queen’s tombs at Kalhu (Nimrud), recently excavated by Iraqi archaeologists (Hussein 2016, [Figure 11.3](#)). More than sixty kilograms of gold, bronze, silver, and electrum goods and precious stones and textiles accompanied the burials of the queens (Hussein 2016). To administer her estates, she even had her own bureaucracy headed by a wealthy and powerful female official called the *shakintu*. The queen’s high position at court and prestige among the people were sometimes important factors during the succession, especially if the king died suddenly and she had to rally support for the designated heir. On occasions when the new king was still a minor, his mother (now the queen mother) often served as regent until her son came of age. Most queen mothers remained respected members of the court, and some, such as Sammuramat (mother of Adad-nirari III) and Naqi’a (mother of Esarhaddon) became influential advisors to their sons. In fact, later Classical accounts of the legendary queen Semiramis were almost certainly based on memories of the power and influence of Sammuramat. Moreover, Naqi’a was almost a co-ruler; she had a palace of her own, received reports on religious and military matters, and composed royal inscriptions. She outlived her son, and her influence continued into the early years of her grandson Ashurbanipal’s reign.

Despite the wealth that royal women and their associates could accumulate and the importance and influence of some queens (MacGregor 2012), women’s lives in the palace may have been highly restricted. Middle Assyrian palace decrees indicate that royal women were sequestered under lock and key in a harem of sorts. Whether or not these edicts were still in place in the Neo-Assyrian Period is debatable, but a class of women probably consisting of the king’s concubines and unmarried relations is known as the *sekretu ekalli* (“confined woman of the palace”; Melville 2004: 40).

Nonroyal Social Classes

Beneath the royal family, the free Assyrian population seems to have been divided into three classes: landholding free men, a professional class, and members of the lower class. Among the landholding free men (*mar bani*) were members of princely houses, wealthy and powerful owners of large estates. This small privileged class supplied the empire’s governors, army officers, chief priests, and often, queens. The king also selected his principal advisors from

their ranks. Obviously, male members of families owning large estates would have been well educated in preparation for their eventual roles in the governing bureaucracy. Interestingly, even the women of these families seem to have been educated, for they served as chief priest-esses and queens, and on occasion may have held other important positions.

The much larger literate professional class (known as *ummanu*) consisted of bankers, scribes, physicians, and educated merchants. The great majority of those who practiced these various professions were male, but a few women are known to have owned businesses, and there were even some female scribes. Generally, though, the status of middle- and lower-class women in Assyrian society was low; they were usually dependent upon their male relations and restricted to caring for the household. The *ummanu* were organized into trade guilds similar to those of the medieval era in Western Europe. However, Assyrian guilds not only maintained professional standards and quality, but also made sure that their members fulfilled their obligations to the state (such as tax payments, forced labor, and military service). Though much Assyrian trade was still conducted by temples and the crown, many members of the *ummanu* also engaged in free market trade, increasing the commerce that was the lifeblood of the Assyrian state. The empire's growth expanded Assyrian trade to such an extent that a Judean prophet could complain that Assyria had multiplied its merchants "more than the stars of the heavens" (Nahum 3:16). The existence of the farmers within the *ummanu* class is not clear, but most of them probably owned their own land. It is possible, though, that some leased their land or managed estates belonging to the state or nobles.

The poorly documented "lower class" (*hubshu*) must have constituted the bulk of the Assyrian population and provided most of its soldiers and colonists. The vast majority were probably tenant farmers on the lands of the crown, temples, or nobles, though many worked as hired laborers in cities and towns; they made up the bulk of the urban as well as the rural population in Assyria. The commoners were poor, but they had many rights that elevated them above the ranks of slaves. For example, the state provided at least two years' sustenance for the wife of a commoner who was killed or captured while serving in the army.

Below these classes of free citizens were the slaves who were state, temple, or personal property. Most were prisoners of war, though some were impoverished individuals who had been forced to become debt slaves or family members (usually children) of paupers who had sold them into slavery. Foreign captives had few rights and were assigned the most menial or dangerous jobs. Debt slaves, though, could own property, marry a free person, conduct business, and appear in court. In theory, they could pay off their debts and obtain their freedom, but high interest rates made that course extremely

difficult, if not impossible. However, skilled slaves who worked as artisans were usually allowed to keep some of their wages, and occasionally they succeeded in purchasing their freedom. In a few instances, gifted slaves even managed to obtain important positions in the government.

The Army

The growth and dominance of Assyria was due primarily to its fighting capabilities, military organization, and its use of armies much larger than those known heretofore. The Neo-Assyrian state had a standing army consisting of professional soldiers (some native Assyrians, but most drawn from the subject peoples, especially the Aramaeans) and Assyrian citizens performing their obligatory term of military service. In theory, all Assyrian males seem to have been subject to a period of military service. However, wealthy individuals appear to have been able to pay for exemptions or to supply others to serve in their place. Those adult male citizens who were not performing their service in the regular army were part of the militia. Contingents drawn from the various conquered peoples supplemented these Assyrian troops.

Earlier armies had consisted of two components, chariotry and infantry, but the Assyrian army had three, chariotry, infantry, and cavalry. Chariots were still significant weapons in Iron Age battles, though their importance declined as mounted cavalry became more efficient in the seventh century. Like the Egyptians, the Assyrians divided their chariot force into squadrons of fifty chariots each. Also as in Egypt, ninth- and early eighth-century Assyrian chariots generally carried two men, a driver and an archer. Quivers of arrows were attached to the body or carriage of the chariot along with an axe for use in close quarters. There was also a shield and long spear kept inside the carriage. The king's chariot usually carried an extra man, a shield carrier, to better protect the king.

The Assyrian infantry consisted of archers, slingers, and spearmen. The archers provided covering fire for the assault forces during a battle in open terrain or when besieging a city (see [Figure 11.2](#)). From the time of Tiglath-pileser III onward, during sieges, archers were usually protected by tall, thick wicker shields behind which they knelt and fired their arrows (see [Figure 11.2](#), lower central section). Like other Assyrian soldiers, they wore bronze or iron helmets and sometimes also donned protective **mail** shirts consisting of a mesh of small interlocked metal rings (known as chain mail) or small overlapping plates of bronze or iron. Slingers also usually wore helmets and mail shirts and provided covering fire by stones from their slings (see [Figure 11.2](#), lower left

side). The spearmen were the army's assault troops in both hand-to-hand battles and during a siege. They wore helmets, were armed with long spears, and occasionally wore long coats of leather or mail. In open battle, spearmen had to be able to move swiftly and freely. Then, only crisscrossed leather bands holding circular metal plates over their chests usually protected their torsos. Their main protection came from light wicker shields strengthened with a covering of leather. The shape and size of the shield varied over time, from small rectangular or circular ones to a large curved shield that covered much of the body.

The most significant military innovation of the first millennium Assyrians was the integration into the army of true cavalry, a highly mobile force with warriors mounted on horseback. They may have learned the effectiveness of mounted warriors from some of their seminomadic opponents in the northern Zagros Mountains, but the earliest depictions of mounted cavalry are in the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II (883 to 859 BCE). The cavalymen rode bareback; saddles and stirrups had not yet been invented. At first, they rode in pairs, one rider holding the reins while the other fought, using either a compound bow or a long spear. By the time of Sargon II, cavalymen were managing their own horses, even when their hands were engaged using bows and arrows. Mounted cavalry was even more effective than chariots in outflanking the enemy and attacking it from the side or rear. Like chariots, spear-carrying horsemen could also launch direct frontal attacks on enemy forces and break through their ranks. The most important advantage of cavalry over chariots, though, was that it could carry out these maneuvers in mountainous and wooded terrain where chariots could not be used.

Accompanying the Assyrian army were efficient auxiliary units of specialists trained for specific tasks such as crossing rivers or besieging cities. Miners and sappers dug tunnels and undermined walls. The engineer corps constructed wheeled battering rams with wicker or, later, leather-covered superstructures to protect the operators (see [Figure 11.2](#)). They built tall siege towers to raise archers to the level of defenders on the battlements. They also erected ramps to allow the battering rams and assault troops to reach and attack vulnerable parts of city walls (see [Figure 11.2](#)). Moreover, the engineers built pontoon bridges across small streams and constructed boats or rafts to carry equipment across larger ones, while the troops swam to the other side on inflated goatskins. All in all, the Assyrian army, including its auxiliary branches, was the best trained, best supplied, and most efficient that the world had yet seen.

Administration of the Empire

While Ashurnasirpal and Shalmaneser campaigned far afield from Assyria and exacted tribute from neighboring states, it was under Tiglath-pileser III that Assyria became a true empire. Tiglath-pileser reorganized the state and made conquered territories into Assyrian provinces rather than tributary vassals. The king oversaw the administration of the empire, both the heart-land of Assyria and the provinces. He was helped in this task by a large cadre of bureaucrats. Chief among these officials was the *turtanu* (“tartan” in the Bible) who was commander-in-chief or “field marshal” of the armies (after the king) as well as the governor of the important district of Harran. He also served a year’s term as *limmu*. The *limmu* was an Assyrian official who gave his name to the year, and he probably also conducted religious ceremonies at the New Year Festival for that year. The king was almost always the *limmu* for his second year on the throne. After him was the *turtanu*, then other district governors in order of their rank. Other members of the king’s inner group of advisors and administrators were the Chief Cup-Bearer (*rab shaqê* in Akkadian and *rabshakeh* in the Bible [2 Kings 18:17–19:8 and Isaiah 36:2–37:8]), the Great Chancellor, the Palace Herald, and the Superintendent.

Assyrians believed that one of the king’s primary roles was to expand Ashur’s reach in the world. Thus, for Assyrians, “all wars were religious wars, justified by the will of Ashur” (Bedford 2009: 35). When the army marched to war, priests and statues of gods preceded it. Although couched in terms of retribution and divine right, Assyrian imperialism was really fueled by the desire for access to goods and labor and the control of trade routes (Bedford 2009: 44–45). The Assyrians usually achieved this goal through the threat of force and the establishment of treaties. The treaties between Assyria and its subject states assured Assyrian support for the vassals, but in exchange required obedience to the Assyrian king, support for his choice as crown prince, yearly payment of tribute, contributions of men to the Assyrian army when requested, and usually that royal or noble hostages be sent to the Assyrian court. When these treaties were abrogated, Assyria retaliated harshly, sometimes replacing the local king, sometimes turning the vassal state into an Assyrian province ruled by an Assyrian governor (Parker 2012: 868–869). Governors oversaw the collection of taxes from the province and were accountable to the king. Numerous letters found at Kalhu and Nineveh show the kings’ direct involvement in the affairs of the state (see [Document 11.2](#)).

Document 11.2 A Neo-Assyrian Administrative Letter

One of hundreds of letters sent between royal officials and the Assyrian king, this letter demonstrates the king's involvement in the running of the empire. It also hints at the reasons for imperial expansion (namely access to resources and tribute) and describes the methods of control (namely the threat of force). Translation follows M. Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 2014, p. 489, Text 28.2. Material in square brackets was added by S. Helft.

To the king [Tiglath-pileser III], my lord, (from) your servant Qurdi-Ashur-lamur [governor of Simirra and Phoenician coast]. Regarding (the king of) Tyre, about whom the king said: "Speak (to him), (but) be king with him"—Well, then, all the wharves are at his disposal, his subjects come and go in the wharves as they please; they sell and buy. Mount Lebanon is at his disposal, and they climb up and down the mountain as they please, and bring down wood. To whoever brings down wood, I impose a tax. I have put some tax collectors in charge of all the wharves of Lebanon (and they) supervise the mountain. I have (also) put a tax collector in charge for those who descend to the wharves that are in the city of Sidon, but the Sidonians sent him away. Afterwards, I sent the (corps of the) Ituayu on Mount Lebanon, and they have made people crawl on the ground for fear. In the end they wrote to me, (saying that) the tax collector, who had left, they had brought back into Sidon. Thus I said to them: "Have the wood brought down here, do your work with it, but do not sell it to the Egyptians or the Philistines, otherwise I will not allow you to go up into the mountain."

Quick and reliable communication between the king and his governors or vassal rulers was therefore vital in such a large and diverse empire. So the Assyrians created a more advanced version of the messenger system used by the Third Dynasty of Ur more than a millennium earlier (see [Chapter 3](#)). Royal messengers traveled by horse or mule along the main thoroughfares of the empire (called "royal roads") between the provinces and Assyria. Along the various routes, at intervals equaling about one day's journey (twenty to thirty miles), there were garrisoned posts with provisions and changes of horses and mules for messengers and their military escorts. This efficient communication system presaged that of the later Achaemenid Persians who are usually given credit for first developing it.

The Assyrians have become famous for their use of torture, mutilation, and other acts of what has been called "calculated frightfulness" (Grayson 1992: Vol. 4, 748) to keep their subjects in line. At least in part, this may have been because the Assyrians regarded the violation of an oath of allegiance to the king as a grave offense against the gods (Bedford 2009: 53). Thus, meting out swift and harsh punishment to rebellious vassals was not just politically or militarily desirable, but a religious obligation as well. When rebellious cities or states surrendered quickly and turned over their seditious leaders to the

Assyrians, the population was usually treated leniently. Only the leaders were punished (usually by torture and then execution) and replaced by others friendly to Assyria. When a city or country refused to surrender, generally the Assyrians followed a much harsher policy. Once the Assyrians triumphed militarily, they would make an example of a portion of the population, usually members of the upper classes. Some were staked to the ground and skinned alive (see [Figure 11.4](#)). Others were mutilated by having their eyes put out or their hands, feet, or tongues cut off. Still others were beaten and tortured in various ways before being impaled on sharpened stakes erected around the city. Such atrocities served as warnings and deterrents to others who might think about rebelling in the future. In addition, the horrible punishments, as well as the depictions of them within Assyrian palaces, testified that the king was upholding the gods' honor and enforcing their justice.

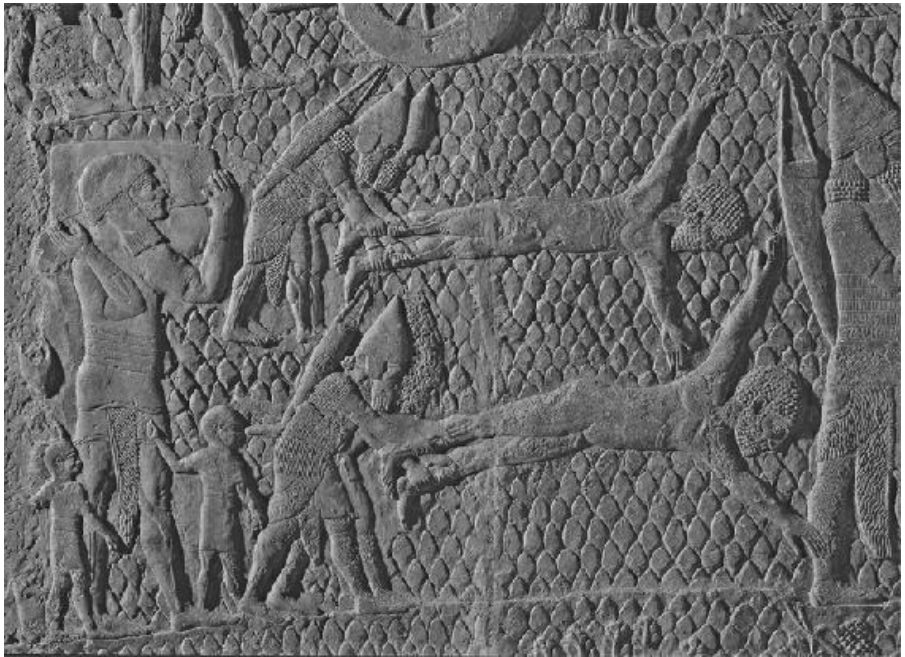


Figure 11.4 Assyrian Troops Preparing to Flay Prisoners Alive after Sennacherib's Lachish Campaign

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

The second part of the punishment for a rebellious people was the deportation of a selected portion of the population, usually members of the upper class, merchants, and artisans. When Ashurnasirpal II began deporting defeated peoples to Assyria early in the ninth century BCE, he mainly intended to resettle depopulated parts of the country. Subsequent inscriptions show that

the foreigners were treated the same as the Assyrians and became Assyrian citizens (Oded 1979: 81–84). However, the deportations carried out from the late eighth through the seventh century BCE by Sargon II and his successors were quite different. These kings treated many of the deportees as “booty” to provide labor on state building projects or to be given as slaves to temples, nobles, or Assyrian cities. Instead of resettling Assyria, large numbers of deportees were just shifted from one part of the empire to another. For example, Sargon II settled Israelite deportees in Assyria (2 Kings 17:6), while Babylonians and Elamites were relocated to the area that had once been the Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:24). During the heyday of their empire, the Assyrians uprooted several hundred thousand people in this way. They hoped that the deportees, far from their native lands and traditions and living among people with different languages and customs, would have little incentive or ability to revolt.

Art, Literature, and Science

People often think of Assyria only as a nation of cruel but efficient warriors, but Assyria also produced many superb artists and scholars. Though Assyrian artistic, literary, and intellectual traditions were based on those of Babylonia, in sculpture, at least, the pupils surpassed their teachers. The Assyrians carved colossal limestone human-headed winged bulls and lions to guard palace doorways. They lined palace walls with beautiful limestone panels sculpted in bas-relief (see [Figures 11.2](#), [11.4](#), and [11.5](#)). The reliefs from the Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, discovered in the 1850s and now in the British Museum, are generally considered the apex of Assyrian art. The most exquisite of all are the hunting scenes, which exhibit an expressive realism and a generally sympathetic understanding of animal suffering. The portrayal of a wild ass hampered in her flight by concern for her foal, or that of a lion suddenly checked in his charge by an arrow piercing the back of his neck, or of a dying lioness roaring her defiance while dragging her paralyzed hind legs (see [Figure 11.5](#)) are all masterpieces of animal sculpture.



Figure 11.5 The Dying Lioness

Bas relief from Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh.

© Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

The Assyrians also treasured and added to earlier Mesopotamian literary, religious, and scientific works. Within his magnificent palace, Ashurbanipal collected a superb library of approximately 20,000 cuneiform tablets copied or taken from archives, schools, and temples throughout Mesopotamia. These texts ranged in date from Sumerian times to his own era and included examples of almost every type of written material: literary works, king lists, annals, vocabulary lists (some of them bilingual), medical tablets, and lists of omens, rituals, and magical incantations. The final editions of key Mesopotamian compositions such as *The Creation Epic* (called *Enuma Elish* in Akkadian) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* come from the Neo-Assyrian era. The same is true for the major omen texts. Moreover, Ashurbanipal's scribes compiled several medical textbooks from earlier texts and traditions. Some of these medical texts are similar to omen texts and contain as much fallacy as careful medical observation. For example, note the following interpretations of "medical" signs concerning pregnant women: "If the top of a pregnant woman's forehead glows white; that which is within her womb is a daughter; she will be rich. If it is red, that which is within her womb is a man-child; he will die" (Saggs 1962: 466). On the other hand, some portions of the texts provide prognoses according to symptoms and the progression of the disease: "If, having been ill four days, he keeps putting his hand on his belly and his face is overcast with yellow, he will die" (Saggs 1962: 463). Still other sections

describe specific syndromes: “If a man’s body is yellow, his face is yellow, and his eyes are yellow, and the flesh is flabby, it is jaundice” (Saggs 1962: 465).

Ashurbanipal claimed to be an exceptional scholar, able to read and understand all of the diverse material in this library:

I learned the craft of the sage Adapa, the hidden secrets of the entire scribal profession.... I have read sophisticated texts in obscure Sumerian and Akkadian difficult to comprehend, and have studied inscriptions on stone from the time before the flood with elite companions.

(Parpola 1999: 24)

While Ashurbanipal was almost certainly literate, it is likely that his claim that he could read obscure and esoteric inscriptions was just an idle boast, for some letters probably written in his own hand are clumsy and unpolished. Nevertheless, Ashurbanipal deserves the gratitude of modern scholars for amassing this great collection of Mesopotamian lore. Its tablets have been the source of much of our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia.

The Assyrians not only compiled and passed on texts about medicine and science; they also produced skilled engineers who continued to enhance Mesopotamian contributions in this field, especially in hydraulic engineering (Jacobsen and Lloyd 1935). It used to be thought that there were few developments in hydraulic engineering between the time of the Minoans and that of the Romans. However, over the past couple of generations greater appreciation of the canals, weirs, dams, catchment basins, and aqueducts that Sennacherib built to supply clean water to Nineveh has led to a reevaluation of this idea (Reade 1978; Ur 2005; Dalley 2001–2002, 2013: 90–105). The water system Sennacherib created brought water from mountain streams to water fields and orchards near Nineveh, and some parts of this system are still in use. But it was also designed to reduce the turbulence of the Khosr River that flowed through Nineveh and to make that stream less prone to flooding the city. A major element in the design was a concrete-lined channel atop a 29-foot-high aqueduct. Arches supported a crucial segment of this aqueduct where it spanned a wadi at Jerwan, Iraq. Analysis showed that the aqueduct’s lining was concrete (Jacobsen and Lloyd 1935: 15–16), a substance many scholars (e.g., Lancaster 2008: 260) still think the Romans invented.

The End of Assyrian Power

Destruction of Assyria (627–605 BCE)

Ashurbanipal was the last great Assyrian ruler, and Assyria's fortunes declined soon after his death. Unfortunately, Assyrian annals end c. 649 BCE. Information on the last years of the empire are scanty and come from foreign accounts, mainly Babylonian. There is no record of Ashurbanipal's death, but it likely occurred around 627 BCE. His vassal Kandalanu of Babylonia seems to have died in the same year. The fact that Kandalanu and Ashurbanipal died in the same year has led some scholars to argue that Kandalanu was just the throne name for Ashurbanipal as ruler of Babylon. But the lack of other evidence for this identification has led most Assyriologists to continue assuming that the names belong to two separate rulers until evidence is found to the contrary. Almost immediately after Ashurbanipal's death, civil war broke out in Assyria, with two of Ashurbanipal's sons fighting over the succession. At the same time, after a year in which there was no recognized king of Babylon, Nabopolassar (Nabu-apla-usur, "Nabu Protect the Heir," 625–605 BCE) claimed the throne. He was formerly an official at Uruk working for the Assyrians and possibly also a Chaldean. His rule was not universally accepted, so there was fierce warfare in Babylonia as well in Assyria. The sources for these years of conflict are somewhat contradictory, and the chronology is problematic. Fortunately, a series of Babylonian chronicles records the events after 616 BCE.

By 616 BCE, Nabopolassar had gained control of Babylonia. He then proceeded to launch an attack against Assyria. His invasion led Assyria to make an alliance with Egypt, probably by abandoning all Assyrian claims to the Levant. In 615 BCE, Nabopolassar failed in an attempt to conquer the city of Ashur and was forced to retreat. But when the Assyrian army followed him southward, the Medes, probably with Babylonian instigation, took advantage of the situation and invaded the Assyrian heartland. A ruler known to Herodotus as Cyaxares (Umakishtar in Babylonian sources, c. 625–585 BCE) unified the Medes and they quickly grew in strength and boldness. They captured Tarbisu, a city near Nineveh, looted Kalhu, and destroyed Ashur in 614 BCE. Nabopolassar marched north to join them, and outside the ruins of Ashur, the Babylonians and Medes entered into a treaty of friendship. Classical sources claim that this alliance was sealed later through the marriage of Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar to a daughter or granddaughter of the Median king, but this tradition has not been confirmed from native texts and is problematic (Brosius 1996: 39, note 10).

The armies of the Medes and Babylonians now worked in tandem. In 612 BCE, the combined forces laid siege to Nineveh. The city held out for three

months, but finally was overwhelmed and turned into a heap of rubble. The allies also destroyed Kalhu (which had torn down major sections of its walls to repair the damage inflicted in 614 BCE) and several other Assyrian cities. As the news of Nineveh's fall spread through the empire, many former Assyrian subjects must have reacted with the joy expressed by the Judean prophet Nahum (3:7b, 19, New Revised Standard Version):

"Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?"...

There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is mortal.

All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you.

For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?

The remaining Assyrian forces fled westward to Harran under the leadership of a new ruler, since the former king had perished at Nineveh. There, a small force of their Egyptian allies joined them. The Babylonians and Medes did not follow immediately. Instead, Nabopolassar spent the next year making sure all of the Assyrian heartland and the provinces along the middle Euphrates were firmly under his control. However, in 610 BCE, the Babylonians and Medes attacked Harran, forcing the Assyrians and Egyptians to flee, first to Syria, and then, after an abortive counterattack on Harran in which the final Assyrian king died, to Carchemish. There, the main Egyptian army led by Pharaoh Necho II (Nekau in Egyptian, 610–595 BCE), who was intent on stopping any further Babylonian expansion, joined the tattered remnants of the former Assyrian army. Josiah, king of Judah, may have tried to prevent the Egyptian forces from aiding the Assyrians, but Necho killed him at Megiddo (c. 609 BCE, see [Chapter 13](#)). In 605 BCE, led by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian crown prince, the joint Babylonian-Median army launched a surprise attack on Carchemish and, after heavy fighting, took the city. Then, near Hama, Nebuchadnezzar decisively defeated an Egyptian force that had escaped from Carchemish. The Egyptians fled southward in disorder with the Babylonians and Medes on their heels. But Nebuchadnezzar broke off the pursuit when he was notified that his father had died. He had to return immediately to be crowned king of Babylon. In little more than twenty years, the once mighty Assyrian Empire had collapsed, and Assyria itself had been almost totally destroyed. Most of Assyria's major cities lay in ruins, never to rise again, and its people, depleted by almost constant fighting, were taken off in slavery by the Medes or absorbed by the former captives in their midst. Seldom in history has a nation, especially one previously so powerful, vanished so quickly and completely.

Debating the Evidence: The Fall of the Assyrian Empire

In 640 BCE Assyria was at the height of its power. Ashurbanipal was an able leader and the borders of the empire extended from Egypt to Babylonia. Elam had finally been subdued and Urartu pacified. Only thirty years later, the major cities of Assyria lay in ruins, and what was left of the Assyrian army was making its last stand in Syria. Assyria, the affluent, urbanized, international hub, became a desolate, tribal, borderland (Liverani 2001: 383). While the Israelites saw the fall of Assyria as the just retribution for Assyria's cruel devastations, modern scholars have had a harder time coming to terms with such a precarious slide. In her assessment of the evidence for the Assyrian collapse, Amélie Kuhrt noted, "the process and circumstances, and possible underlying causes, all remain obscure" (1995: 541).

As we have seen, the enemies of Assyria wrought their revenge in 612 BCE, after a century or more of punishing Assyrian domination. But how were they able to defeat an enemy that had the resources of millions of people at its disposal? And more importantly, why couldn't Assyria rise again after its losses?

An important contributing cause is the instability of the monarchy itself during the Neo-Assyrian Period. As we have seen, Assyria never successfully established rules of succession. The prolonged civil wars towards the end of the empire, first between Ashurbanipal and his brother Shamash-shuma-ukin, and then between his own sons after his death, obviously left Assyria weak and vulnerable. At the same time, structural problems in the empire must have contributed to its collapse. Norman Yoffee argues (2009: 192) that the policies of the late Assyrian kings were their own undoing. In his view, the Assyrian kings centralized power in the hands of the palace and the army elite at the expense of the old landed aristocracy. The top levels of society owed their status to the state rather than to traditional kinship ties. Mass deportations in the eighth-seventh centuries BCE meant that the bottom levels of society, the laborers, were mainly foreigners, with no real ties to the state. When the destructions of the Medes and Babylonians removed the upper tier of Assyrian society, the traditional bulwark of Assyrian culture, the landed gentry, no longer existed. This is why there was no resurgence of the Assyrian state, or the Assyrian language and religion after the Median-Babylonian attacks.

Another line of reasoning emphasizes the economic stresses endemic in the Assyrian imperial system. The Assyrian core was dependent on the taxation and tribute of its conquered provinces, but its heavy hand made rebellions common. The empire was held together by an immense military machine that was expensive to maintain. As the empire grew, so did the costs of the military

and administrative apparatuses of the empire, leading to decreasing returns from military expansion. Add to this the depopulation of the countryside in favor of the growth of the urban population in Assyria, and you have an overextended state with declining resources (Liverani 2001: 388). These factors made for a precarious economic situation. Thus, in some scholars' views, the empire was always something of a house of cards, easily undermined (Van de Mieroop 2016: 286).

One possible factor that is often overlooked in histories of the Assyrian Empire is the demographic changes in seventh-century BCE Assyria. The Assyrian policies of mass deportations in the eighth-seventh centuries BCE significantly expanded the population of the Assyrian heartland. Despite Sennacherib's hydraulic programs to increase agricultural productivity in the environs of Nineveh, the new populations would have put an extraordinary stress on the Assyrian hinterland where agriculture was always marginal (Schneider and Adali 2014). When combined with evidence for a short period of aridity in the mid- to late-seventh century BCE, these two factors together could have brought significant unrest and economic instability under Ashurbanipal and his successors, leaving them unable to cope with the assaults of their enemies (Schneider and Adali 2014, disputed by Soltysiak 2016).

The Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire (625–560 BCE)

Formation of the Neo-Babylonian Empire

The Medes and Babylonians seem to have divided up portions of the former Assyrian Empire with little animosity or conflict. The Neo-Babylonian (or Chaldean) kings took over the western provinces and the Medes took the eastern portions of Assyria. The Medes may have made the closely related Persians their vassals, though their control over Persia and areas to the north and west is very uncertain (see [Map 11.1](#)).

Almost immediately after his coronation, Nebuchadnezzar II (604 to 562 BCE) returned to Syria to make sure that the resurgent Egyptian power in the Levant had been destroyed and that the region was firmly under Babylonian control. For the next three years, he campaigned in Syria and Palestine, collecting tribute from Damascus, Sidon, Tyre, Judah, and other states and destroying those, such as Ashkelon, who resisted. In 601 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar

marched against Egypt, hoping to finish the conquest he had been compelled to abort earlier. This time, the Egyptians fought fiercely, and both sides suffered heavy casualties. Nebuchadnezzar was forced to retreat to Babylon to regroup, but the Egyptian army had also been so bloodied that it could not pursue the Babylonians. However, Nebuchadnezzar's defeat convinced Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, against the advice of the prophet Jeremiah, to stop paying tribute to Babylon and return to an Egyptian alliance. It took Nebuchadnezzar a couple of years to build up his strength before responding. Just as the Babylonian armies marched westward in 598 BCE, Jehoiakim died (or possibly was murdered), leaving his son, Jehoiachin, to experience Babylon's wrath. Nebuchadnezzar descended on Jerusalem at the beginning of 597 BCE and, after a brief siege, forced the city to surrender. He seized the treasures of Solomon's Temple and of the royal palace as tribute, carried off Jehoiachin, most of the royal family, and thousands of the upper classes, and placed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, on Judah's throne. Most of the Judean exiles, including the prophet Ezekiel, were settled near Nippur, but their king was kept as a hostage in Nebuchadnezzar's palace in Babylon. There, archaeologists found cuneiform tablets listing the rations given to Jehoiachin (called "Ya'ukina, king of the land of Yahudu") and his family (Saggs 1962: 144).

Though the Babylonians conducted several campaigns in Syria-Palestine during the next few years, they do not seem to have prevented Judah and other Levantine vassals from contemplating rebellion. After Psammetichus II (Psamtik II, 595–589 BCE), successor of Necho II, showed Egyptian strength by a march into Palestine in 591 BCE, Zedekiah of Judah was again moved to revolt. Psammetichus died in 589 BCE, but his son and successor, Wahibre (Apries to the Greeks and Hophra in the Bible, 589–570 BCE), supported the rebellion by capturing Gaza and attacking Tyre and Sidon. When Nebuchadnezzar's armies approached, though, the Egyptians retreated to their own country and the Babylonians seem to have regained control of most of Phoenicia and Philistia. Then, in 587 BCE, the Babylonians began an 18-month siege of Jerusalem that ended with the city's almost complete destruction in the summer of 586 BCE. This is one of the best documented events in Near Eastern history, as it is described in both the Bible and in Babylonian chronicles. Zedekiah's sons were killed before his eyes; then he was blinded and taken to Babylon. Thousands of Judah's citizens were deported to Babylonia where they joined their countrymen, beginning the famous "Babylonian Exile." Many others escaped the Babylonians and fled to Egypt (see [Chapter 13](#).)

Meanwhile, according to Herodotus, the Medes had been engaged in a five-year war with Lydia for control of central Anatolia. Supposedly, a solar eclipse

(which astronomers date to May 28, 585 BCE) interrupted a major battle between the two armies. Nevertheless, after this seeming sign of divine displeasure, the Medes and Lydians allegedly agreed to a peace treaty (mediated by the Neo-Babylonian and Cilician kings), making the Halys River the boundary between their respective kingdoms.² Mesopotamian sources cast doubt on the accuracy of this account, however, and on the existence of a Median Empire in general (Rollinger 2003). Urartu seems to have existed until the formation of the Persian Empire, and central Anatolia east of the Halys also may have remained largely independent until conquered by the Persians. Rather than building a widespread unified empire, the Medes probably controlled only the Zagros region and launched sporadic raids into neighboring areas as Zagros tribes had done for centuries. In addition, they may have been able to establish their sway over several Iranian rulers or tribes.

Though the Medes and Babylonians were on friendly terms during the early part of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar seems to have feared the possibility of future Median raids. In the latter part of his reign, he followed the example of the much earlier Third Dynasty of Ur and built a great defensive wall across Mesopotamia where the Tigris and Euphrates are closest together. He constructed another fortification wall just north of Babylon between the Euphrates and one of its branches. These walls protected Babylonia from invasion from the north and probably were intended primarily as protection against the Medes.

Nebuchadnezzar may have bypassed Tyre in 588–587 BCE, or it may have been briefly pacified and then revolted again. In any case, three years after the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians besieged Tyre. It held out for thirteen years, but finally surrendered in 571 BCE. Continued unrest in Judah, including the assassination of the governor the Babylonians had installed, caused further deportations of people from 582 to 581 BCE. But for the last ten years of his reign, the Levant was firmly in Nebuchadnezzar's hands. Ezekiel 29:19–21 and a fragmentary Babylonian tablet indicate that Nebuchadnezzar attempted another invasion of Egypt in 568 BCE, but he does not seem to have penetrated beyond the eastern Delta area—if, indeed, he got that far. On the other hand, he does seem to have conquered the Arab tribes of northwestern Arabia before he died in 562 BCE and was succeeded by his son, Amel-Marduk (called Evil-Merodach in 2 Kings 25:27 and Jeremiah 52:31 in the Bible).

The Collapse of the Neo-Babylonian Empire

Almost nothing is known of the brief reigns of Amel-Marduk (“Man of

Marduk,” 561–560 BCE) and his successor Neriglissar (Nergal-shar-usur, “Nergal Protect the King,” 559–556 BCE). The Hellenistic Babylonian historian Berossus claimed that Amel-Marduk ruled in an overbearing and unlawful fashion, prompting his murder and replacement by Neriglissar, his brother-in-law, and a high-ranking general. Neriglissar’s inscriptions indicate that he undertook some public works projects and won a battle against a ruler from western Cilicia who had raided into the Babylonian-held territory in eastern Cilicia and northwestern Syria. He reigned for four years then died, leaving the throne to his son, Labashi-Marduk, who was still only a child. Only a couple of months into the new reign, however, the leading officers of the state decided to replace Neriglissar’s heir with Nabonidus, a military commander under Nebuchadnezzar and Neriglissar.

Nabonidus (Nabu-na’id, “One Who Reverses Nabu,” 556–539 BCE), “the son of a nobody,” came from Harran where his mother was probably a priestess in the temple of the moon god, Sin. He is the last king of the Chaldean Dynasty, but it is not known if his parents were of Chaldean origin. He was devoted to his mother, Adad-guppi, and he buried her with royal honors when she finally died at the age of 104 in 547 BCE. Because of her, Nabonidus developed a deep reverence for the deity she had served throughout her life. He restored the ruined ziggurat and temples of Ur, one of Sin’s cities, and rebuilt Ehulhul, the moon god’s temple in Harran. He also made his daughter *entu*-priestess of Nanna (Sin) in Ur, following the precedent Sargon of Akkad had established some two millennia earlier. Nabonidus displayed great reverence for the past, searching out earlier foundation deposits (inscriptions and objects ritually buried beneath the foundations of a building at its founding) whenever he restored the great temples of Sumer and Akkad so that the temples could be rebuilt properly. During his repair work at various sites, Nabonidus uncovered inscriptions, monuments, and statues of his predecessors and kept these antiquities in “museums” in various cities. One such collection was placed in a room in the residence of his daughter in Ur where they were found in the 1920s CE by the famous archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley. Another cache of antiquities (some as early as the Third Dynasty of Ur) was uncovered in Nebuchadnezzar’s palace in Babylon. Because of Nabonidus’s fascination with ancient customs and his search for antiquities, he is sometimes dubbed “the first archaeologist.”

Nabonidus’s emphasis on the god Sin and the city of Harran angered the priests of Marduk and other conservative elements in Babylonia. So, when plague, famine, and high inflation struck southern Mesopotamia, Nabonidus regarded the misfortunes as punishment for the treasonous murmurings of the priests and people of Babylon, Borsippa, Nippur, Ur, Uruk, and Larsa. Supposedly led by Sin, around 549 BCE, Nabonidus installed his son Belshazzar

(Bel-shar-usur, “Lord [Marduk] Protect the King”) as regent in Babylon and took up residence in the oasis of Teima in northwest Arabia (see [Map 11.1](#)). Some discern economic motives for this move, for Teima was the point where the caravan trade route from southern Arabia diverged to go in different directions to Damascus, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Others favor a religious explanation, noting that Teima was a center for the worship of the moon god, as Harran was. Still others argue that his enemies must have prevented Nabonidus from returning to Babylon. Whatever his reasons, Babylonian chronicles claim that Nabonidus stayed in Teima for most of the rest of his reign, and during that time, the New Year Festival could not be celebrated in Babylon, for it required the king’s presence.

Angered by Nabonidus’s earlier slights and the constant postponements of the New Year Festival, many priests and high officials in Babylon secretly supported Cyrus II, the Persian king. They spread propaganda accusing Nabonidus of being a madman and a heretic. These charges continued to circulate in much later times, and are reflected in Hellenistic works such as the biblical Book of Daniel (Collins 1992; Coogan 2013: 531–537; Satlow 2014: 129–133), where Nebuchadnezzar is erroneously identified as the mad king, and in a legendary account found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Cyrus II had risen to the throne of Persia in 560 or 559 BCE, and *The Nabonidus Chronicle*, a Babylonian text, indicates that in 553 BCE Cyrus was attacked by Astyages (Ishtumegu in cuneiform sources), king of the Medes (c. 585–550 BCE).³ After three years of warfare, Cyrus defeated Astyages and gained control of the Median territory. During the following decade, while Nabonidus stayed in Teima and work proceeded on Sin’s temple in Harran, Cyrus extended his power into Asia Minor and further into Iran (see [Chapter 12](#)). By 539 BCE, the Persian king was ready to take on Babylon. Nabonidus finally returned to the city and directed its defense, but it was too late. Belshazzar was killed while trying to prevent Cyrus’s invasion of Babylonia; Nabonidus fled, and Babylon fell to Cyrus without resistance. Soon afterward, the Persians captured Nabonidus and probably killed him, though different stories about his fate circulated in later times. Thus ended not only the Neo-Babylonian Empire, but also the last native dynasty to govern Babylon.

Neo-Babylonian Culture

Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon

The Neo-Babylonian Period was an urban era with more people living in cities than at any time since the early second millennium. Utilizing the great wealth they accumulated from taxes, tribute, and trade, the Babylonian kings undertook large-scale renovation and rebuilding projects in many cities, but, of course, most of their attention was lavished on Babylon itself. The ruins of ancient Babylon, still called Babil in modern times, were extensively excavated from 1899 until 1917 CE by a German expedition led by Robert Koldewey. Iraq's Directorate General of Antiquities has conducted further excavations and extensive restorations at the site since 1958 CE until the current troubles in Iraq. Though some of the remains uncovered by archaeologists may derive from restorations of Babylon by Esarhaddon, Ashurbanipal, and Nabopolassar, most reflect the widespread activities of Nebuchadnezzar who thoroughly enlarged and reconstructed the city. The Babylon of the Chaldean rulers continued to astonish visitors in later times and so impressed the Greeks that some Classical authors recognized two of its monuments (the "Hanging Gardens" and the city's huge fortification walls) as wonders of the ancient world.

In ancient times, the Euphrates, which now flows to the west of the ruins, ran through the middle of this large city of about 100,000 people and 2,224 acres. Babylon was roughly a rectangle, with the Euphrates cutting through its long sides and dividing it in two with a much larger portion of the city on the eastern side of the river (see [Figure 11.6](#)). It was protected by a 40-foot-wide moat connected to the Euphrates and a double set of walls separated by about twenty-four feet, each strengthened by towers spaced sixty feet apart. The outer wall was about twelve feet thick and the inner wall twenty-one feet thick. Eight great fortified gateways and several smaller entrances gave access into the city. Beyond the old city's walls on the east bank of the river, Nebuchadnezzar built another great double wall and moat about seventeen miles long protecting his grand summer palace (known as the "Northern Palace") and some of the suburbs that had developed outside the old city (see [Figure 11.6](#)).

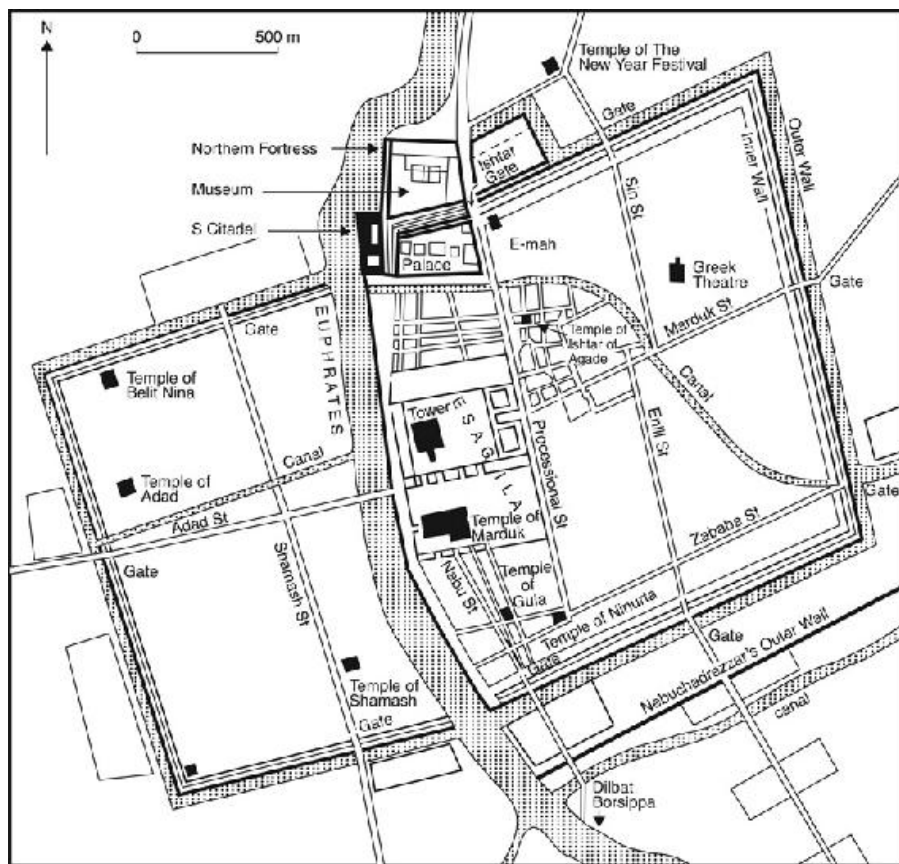


Figure 11.6 The Inner City of Babylon at the Time of Nebuchadnezzar (604–562 BCE)

Joan Oates, *Babylon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), Illustration 100 on p. 148, drawn by P. Bridgewater.

Nebuchadnezzar also extensively restored Babylon's older palaces. The largest was the so-called Southern Palace on the Euphrates (see Figure 11.6) protected by two fortresses, the North Citadel and South Citadel. He enlarged and almost totally rebuilt this palace, replacing the older sun-dried brick buildings with ones made of baked brick and using imported cedar beams to support the roof. He created a large new throne room decorated with colorful glazed bricks forming figures of lions, garlands of palmettos, rosettes, and other motifs accented with gold, silver, and precious stones. Nearby were the king's luxurious private quarters and the harem. The palace included five large courtyards and quarters for administrators and the garrison.

Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal had rebuilt *Esagila* (the great temple of Marduk), *Etemenanki* (its ziggurat), and Babylon's many other temples. Nabopolassar also had restored *Etemenanki*. However, Nebuchadnezzar embellished the eight-tiered ziggurat (whose name means "House of the

Foundation Platform of Heaven and Earth”) with impressive decorations and covered the temple at its top with blue glazed bricks. This great ziggurat, about 300 feet square at its base and probably about as high, may have been the inspiration for the biblical story in Genesis of the Tower of Babel (the Hebrew name for Babylon). Nebuchadnezzar provided even more lavish decoration for some of the chapels within *Esagila*. He plated the interior walls of the chapel of Marduk with gold and decorated the bases of its columns with alabaster and lapis lazuli. He also provided the god with a gold-plated wooden bed and throne as well as a ceremonial chariot and barge made of wood plated with gold and silver set with precious stones. Herodotus reports that 800 talents (about three tons) of gold had been used in this chapel alone. Nebuchadnezzar also decorated the walls of other shrines with gold, silver, and precious stones.

The greatest surviving example of Nebuchadnezzar’s monumental structures is the Ishtar Gate near the original northern entrance into the city (see [Figures 11.6](#) and [11.7](#)). This huge gateway, through which ran a wide road known as the Processional Way, was actually a series of gates with protective battlements above and guard chambers at ground level. The towers at its northern end were seventy feet high; the vaulted opening was fifteen feet wide and thirty-five feet high (see [Figure 11.7](#)). The towers at the southern end of the gateway were much taller, but they were not preserved to their full height. The gateway’s walls were covered with blue-glazed bricks with alternating pairs of red and white dragons (sacred to Marduk) and bulls (sacred to Adad) standing out in bas-relief. The walls north of the gate on either side of the Processional Way (lower center and right of [Figure 11.7](#)) were also lined with blue enameled bricks decorated with a procession of large white bas-relief lions (sacred to Ishtar) with red and yellow manes. As this gateway was the most spectacular find the early twentieth-century CE German excavators made, they dismantled it, carefully numbered each brick, and shipped the remains to Berlin. There the bricks were reassembled in the Vorderasiatisches Museum, where visitors can see them today.

The Processional Way, along which major religious and military pageants proceeded, ran from Nebuchadnezzar’s summer palace and the Temple of the New Year Festival through the Ishtar Gate, past the entrance of the Southern Palace to a point between the enclosure for the ziggurat and the *Esagila* temple (see [Figure 11.6](#)). It then turned westward and ran between the two sacred enclosures (with entrances into both) and ended at a bridge across the Euphrates. This large avenue was thirty to fifty feet wide and paved with limestone slabs brought from Lebanon. Red breccia stone from the middle Euphrates region bordered the central part of the road (about twenty feet wide). It is no wonder that visitors like Herodotus who viewed this road and the magnificent structures lining it were awed by the grandeur of Chaldean

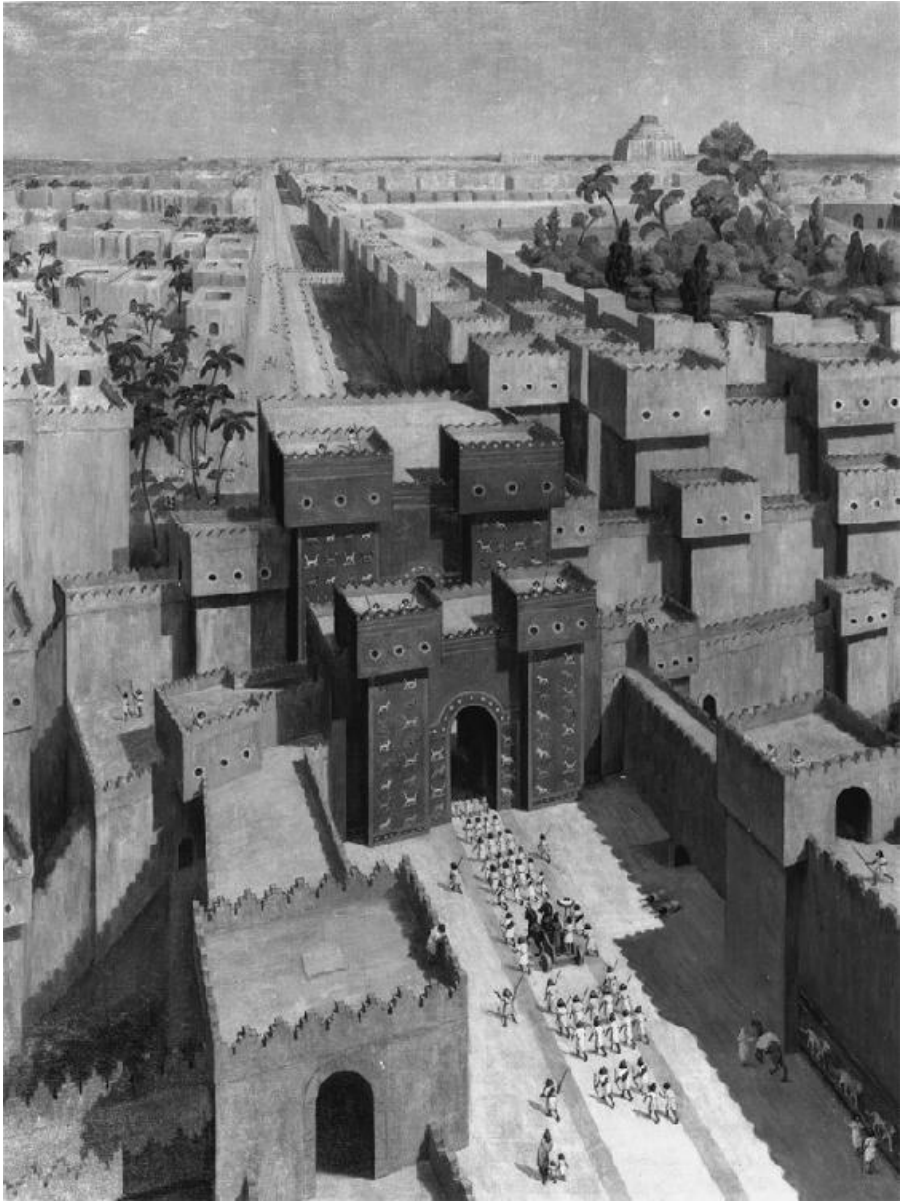


Figure 11.7 Reconstruction of Babylon's Ishtar Gate and Processional Way

Just inside the gate on the right is the Southern Palace and the traditional site of the “Hanging Gardens.” The ziggurat *Etemenanki* can be seen in the distance in the upper right.

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In the ancient Classical world, Babylon was best known for its famous “Hanging Gardens,” one of the “seven wonders of the world.” It is included in the earliest extant list of wonders by Antipater of Sidon (a second century CE poet), along with the Walls of Babylon, the Pyramids, the statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Colossus of Rhodes, the huge tomb of Mausolus, and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. His list seems to have attracted the public’s fancy and his choices remained the most popular. The so-called canonical list of seven wonders written down by Gregory of Tours (536–594 CE) later removed the Walls of Babylon and replaced them with the Lighthouse of Alexandria, but the Hanging Gardens remained (Finkel 2000: 38–58; Jordan 2002: 8–11, 109–120; Dalley 2013: 1–41).

While Classical Greek authors commented on the walls of Babylon, the Hanging Gardens were first mentioned by Berossus, a Babylonian priest who lived around 290–280 BCE and wrote a history of Babylon in Greek for a Hellenistic audience. His work has not survived, but the Jewish historian Josephus quoted Berossus’ reference to the Hanging Gardens in the first century CE (*Antiquities of the Jews* X.11.1; *Against Apion* I.19). According to Josephus, Berossus claimed that Nebuchadnezzar constructed a hanging paradise, a tiered building covered with trees and plants, in order to please a wife from Media who missed her native mountains.⁴ Other ancient authors of the first century BCE and first century CE also describe a massive structure made to look like a mountain with terraces or tiers (similar to an ancient theater) planted with large trees and all sorts of plants and flowers. However, these writers do not claim to have seen the Hanging Gardens. They are basing their accounts on the writings of fourth and third century BCE authors whose works are now lost. The gardens are described as rising as high as the city walls (about 60–75 feet high), standing next to the Euphrates River and having mechanical devices to raise water from the river to water its plants. It also should be noted that Diodorus Siculus, who wrote between c. 60 and 30 BCE and like Josephus depended on earlier sources for his information about the gardens, states that they were not constructed by Semiramis (a legendary Assyrian queen), but rather by a later Syrian (i.e., Assyrian) king (Dalley 2013: 23, 31). And Quintus Curtius Rufus, a Roman author of the first century CE, also states that the gardens were built by a Syrian (or Assyrian) king who ruled Babylon (Dalley 2013: 38–39). So, clearly, not all of the early sources credited the Hanging Gardens to Nebuchadnezzar.

Early archaeologists versed in the Classics tried to discover Babylon’s famed gardens. Digging in the early part of the twentieth century CE, the German

excavator of Babylon, Robert Koldewey, uncovered the foundations of a large building that he suggested might be the famous Hanging Gardens. This structure was located in the northeastern corner of Nebuchadnezzar's Southern Palace (see [Figure 11.6](#)). It had thick lower walls and fourteen vaulted chambers that could have supported a high superstructure of enormous weight. He also found a well with three chambers in the crypts that he felt could have supplied water to the structure above them by some kind of bucket chain (Finkel 2000: 52–53). However, the building was too far from the river to make irrigation from the Euphrates an easy process and the well probably could not have supplied the volume of water needed for a large number of trees and plants. It has been estimated that the garden described in the ancient sources would have required about 8,200 gallons of water a day (Stevenson 1992: 51). Moreover, cuneiform tablets found on this site list rations of oil and barley for captives held in Babylon, including some rations for the Judean king Jehoiachin and his family (Finkel 2000: 54). Thus, most modern scholars question Koldewey's identification and think that whatever was built above the excavated vaults (perhaps administrative offices for various officials and bureaucrats), the basement rooms at least were used for storing large amounts of barley, oil, and other commodities, most of which had to be kept dry.

It should be noted that Herodotus (fifth century BCE), who wrote at length about Babylon's walls and other structures, did not mention the fabulous Hanging Gardens. Neo-Babylonian records that provide detailed accounts of Babylon's major buildings, streets, gates, and temples also fail to mention them (Dalley 2003, 2013: 13–27). Since nothing found at Babylon fits the descriptions in the Classical sources, some scholars are inclined to believe that the Hanging Gardens never really existed or that the ancient descriptions are exaggerations based on a misinterpretation of a real Babylonian building. For example, Donald Wiseman thinks a series of terraces described in a cylinder inscription as located between the Euphrates and the Southern Palace may have been interpreted as a hanging garden (Wiseman 1985: 56–57). However, long before the Classical descriptions of the Hanging Gardens were written, the course of the Euphrates had been diverted so that it no longer ran next to the Southern Palace at Babylon. Its distance from the supposed gardens would then have made irrigation impractical. Would ancient Greek visitors in the second and first centuries BCE have described an area with withered trees and plants as a marvel or wonder that travelers should go see?

An Assyriologist, Stephanie Dalley, thinks not (2013: 14–16). She has argued that the gardens did exist, but not at Babylon. The Classical descriptions reflect the kind of Assyrian gardens known from descriptions and bas-reliefs at Khorsabad, Nimrud, and Nineveh rather than the type of garden common in southern Mesopotamia. The Assyrian king Sennacherib constructed a

wonderful terraced garden next to his palace on the citadel of Nineveh, high above the nearby Tigris. To water it, he had an elaborate system of canals, weirs, dams, and amazing aqueducts made to control the turbulent flow of the Khosr River that bisected Nineveh and to bring clean water into the citadel from distant mountain streams (Dalley 2013: 90–98). Sennacherib was also an Assyrian (“Syrian”) king who ruled Babylon, as Diodorus Siculus and Quintus Curtius Rufus claimed for the gardens’ creator. According to Dalley, Hellenistic Greek accounts of the Hanging Gardens and its water system were actually based on Sennacherib’s elaborate irrigation works at Nineveh that were still visible and at least partly maintained into Hellenistic times. We know that writers of Classical antiquity sometimes exhibited confusion between the two rivers of Mesopotamia, between Assyria and Babylonia, and between Nineveh and Babylon. So, possibly, over the centuries the two sites were confused with one another and the garden and water system of Nineveh came to be credited to Babylon (Dalley 1994, 2013: 61–208).

There can be little doubt that the Hanging Gardens actually existed, just like the other “wonders.” There is fairly consistent ancient testimony, and the descriptions are probably based on the writings of members of Alexander the Great’s entourage who claimed to have seen this marvel. However, the writings of these eyewitnesses are now lost. The fact that Herodotus did not mention the gardens need not discourage us. He also visited Egypt and described the Pyramids of Giza, but he failed to mention the Great Sphinx. Likewise, the absence of the gardens in Babylonian texts may be of little account, as the gardens may not have been extraordinary to the Babylonians themselves. The shifting course of the river and the erosion of ancient structures may mean that we may never be able to locate the Hanging Gardens. So, for now, the reality behind the ancient stories of the fabulous Hanging Gardens remains to be determined.

The Akitu Festival and the Foundations of Kingship

The ideology of kingship in Babylonia differed markedly from the Assyrian model. Nebuchadnezzar and Neriglissar were certainly great warriors, but their inscriptions laud their fulfillment of religious obligations rather than military accomplishments. The king’s legitimacy stemmed from his relationship with Marduk and had to be renewed on an annual basis. This took place during the most important ritual event in the Babylonian calendar, the New Year Festival (also known as the *akitu* festival). The **akitu** was an ancient agricultural festival celebrated at the spring equinox. By Neo-Babylonian times

it incorporated a variety of ceremonies concerning the harvest, the equinox, and creation of the cosmos (Black 1981). Over the course of the eleven-day festival, the priests honored the statues of Marduk and Nabu (Marduk's son, the god of writing, who was brought from Borsippa for the occasion) and recited the *Enuma Elish*, the epic account of Marduk's rise to power and his creation of the world and mankind. The festival climaxed on the eighth day when the king placed Marduk on his throne, then led a procession of all of Babylonia's gods out of the Esagila (Marduk's temple) along the Processional Way to the *akitu* temple outside of the city, where a banquet was held. A sacred marriage may have taken place at this point, but this is not certain. On the eleventh day, Marduk returned to Babylon and the "destinies of the land" were fixed. Only the king could begin the *akitu* procession, a process that was called "taking Bel (i.e., Marduk) by the hand." As this rite ensured a favorable year for the city, Babylonians were justly distraught when Babylon was without a king, for example, during the years Nabonidus resided in Teima.

Often understood as the ritual renewal of Marduk's triumph over chaos, the *akitu* also served to restore the legitimacy of the king. On the fifth day of the festival, the king would enter the shrine of Marduk where a priest removed his royal insignia (staff, ring, mace, and crown). Then the priest slapped the king across the face, and forced him to kneel. The king, thus humiliated, had to defend his piety to Marduk before he was reinstated with the royal insignia and his destiny was fixed. The priests then slapped him a second time. If tears fell from his eyes, the gods were favorable to him and Babylon was to have a good year. Thus, the legitimacy of the king rested on his pious behavior towards Marduk and Babylon, as he states, "I have not sinned, Lord of the Lands" (Black 1981: 44).

Commerce and Finance

The Neo-Babylonian era (which in Babylonia continues into the period of Achaemenid Persian rule over Babylon) was a time of flourishing commercial enterprise thanks to the relative security of this period. As in the past, temples continued to be economic hubs. Many had large landholdings with orchards and herds of animals in addition to the wealth they drew from regular "gifts" (or "dues," since these payments were not voluntary). Everyone, even the king, had to pay a portion of his or her profits to the temples. The temples also usually owned large numbers of slaves, most provided by the king from prisoners of war, but some were children of individuals unable to pay their temple "dues." The temples engaged in money lending and trade in order to

manage their endowments and to acquire materials for the maintenance of their staff, buildings, and cult.

The Neo-Babylonian era also saw the rise of an independent entrepreneurial class. Important family firms existed in many central and southern Mesopotamian cities, including Sippar, Borsippa, Nippur, Uruk, Larsa, and Ur, in addition to those in Babylon. The survival of several of their private archives provides scholars with detailed information on financial and commercial activities during this period. Some of these archives begin under Neo-Babylonian kings and continue into the early Persian era, while others only start after the Persian conquest of Babylon. Thus, the Persian conquest did not fundamentally change the economic and social landscape of Babylonia.

Most of the private businesses were family enterprises whose activities generally were restricted to the local areas where the families lived. A few firms, however, engaged in buying and selling merchandise, credit transactions, real estate deals, socially and monetarily beneficial marriage arrangements, and slave trading all over Babylonia, and sometimes even into Iran (see [Document 11.3](#)). One such notable business firm was that of the Egibi family of Babylon that was prominent in Mesopotamian and western Iranian commerce in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. Members of this family handled large capital transactions in silver and engaged in other commercial activity. They also owned a considerable amount of agricultural property, several houses, and many slaves. As Daniel Snell has pointed out (1995: 1495), “though the family’s activities have been compared to those of a bank, they seem more like a company involved in real-estate management.” Some members of the Egibi family even became estate managers for members of the royal family.

Document 11.3 A Neo-Babylonian Promissory Note

This contract (Joannès 1995: 1484), concerns a loan of silver for an unspecified period of time and is emblematic of business transactions in the Neo-Babylonian Period. The loan bears no interest, but the borrower puts up his adopted sister as security, and until the loan is repaid, she has to work as the servant of the lender with no pay. Paul-Alain Beaulieu translated the original French translation of the contract into English. The translator supplied the material in parentheses; the material in square brackets is by W. Stiebing.

Iddin-Nabu, son of Nabu-mukin-zeri, descendant of Shakhatti-eresh, loaned to Nabu-ushallim, son of Nabu-shum-ibni, descendant of Esagil-mansum, 1 mina (about 500 grams) of certified 85-percent silver (i.e., 15 percent alloy), from his

personal cash box, (and) suitable for commercial transactions.

As pledge for this mina of certified silver, Amtiya, the adopted daughter raised by his father, Nabu-mukin-zeri [sic, it should be Nabu-shum-ibni], and his mother, Mizatu. This servant will not receive any salary, and the silver will bear no interest.

Amtiya will be the servant of Iddin-Nabu. Nabu-ushallim bears responsibility for any claim on Amtiya that should be brought by another creditor.

Witnesses: Bel-kasir, son of Nabu-shum-ibni, descendant of Esagil-mansum; Itti-Nabu-balatu, son of Nabu-iddin, descendant of Mubannu; Shamash-eresh, son of Bel-apla-iddin, descendant of Re'ani; Remut, son of the Shamash-shum-lishir, descendant of Maqartu; Purshu, son of Gimillu; Itti-Nabu-guzu, son of Ea-epush.

Scribe: Bel-iddina, son of Nabu-etir, descendant of Etieru.

Drawn at Borsippa in the thirteenth year of Darius, king of Babylon and the lands.

During two years, until the fifteenth of Nisanu (March), Nabu-ushallim and Iddin-Marduk will each provide an equal share of Amtiya's clothing.

The rise in private urban entrepreneurship is tied to developments in the agricultural sector of the economy. Private ownership of land declined in the Neo-Babylonian Period. Instead, the bulk of the rural population were temple dependents, tenant farmers, or resettled deportees. Agriculture became a commercial enterprise with a hierarchy of businessmen, including the financial houses, investing, leasing and managing the estates of the crown or the temple, and engaging in grain speculation. The other significant financial development is the increasing monetization of the Babylonian economy, with silver replacing payments in kind. Silver had come into the Babylonian economy as tribute and booty, and was put into circulation through the payment of hired laborers and as a form of credit. By the Persian Period all taxes and rents were levied in silver. Although coinage was already in use in Anatolia and the Greek city states, the use of coins did not become common in Mesopotamia until the Hellenistic Period (Snell 1995: 1494–1496). (For a more detailed overview of the Babylonian economy, see Jursa 2007).

Some of the agricultural hinterlands was in the hands of deportees who were given land in exchange for service to the state. The Chaldean dynasty of Babylon continued the Assyrian practice of deporting portions of defeated populations, resettling the exiles in southern Mesopotamia that had lost a significant portion of its population during the preceding wars. As a result of the resettlements and of Babylon's rise to power in the Near East, it and other southern Mesopotamian cities became very cosmopolitan with people from Elam, Persia, Media, Lydia, Ionia, Phoenicia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt all participating in commerce. Some of the deportees went into business for themselves and entered the entrepreneurial class. Though native Babylonian

family firms controlled most of the commerce within Baby-lonia, most international trade seems to have been in the hands of resident foreigners. The cosmopolitan nature of Babylonia contributed to the decline of Akkadian as a spoken language, replaced by Aramaic.

Scholarly Activity

As in the Neo-Assyrian Period, scholars of Neo-Babylonian times not only copied and preserved literary, religious, mathematical, and scientific works from the past, but also continued to build on that great legacy. Some of their most important advances were in the field of astronomy that was seen as essential in negotiating the human-divine relationship. Mesopotamians had long observed the movements of heavenly bodies and used astronomical phenomena as omens, but reports of systematic astronomical observations probably only began about 750 BCE during the Neo-Assyrian Period. Examples of such observations on cuneiform tablets are attested only from around 700 BCE, but the later Alexandrian Greek astronomer Ptolemy (second century CE) claimed to have Mesopotamian records of eclipses from 747 BCE onwards. Astronomical “diaries” were compiled listing monthly astronomical observations as well as information on changes in commodity prices, river levels, and the weather. Using such detailed astronomical observations, Neo-Babylonian astronomers were able to calculate the average apparent movements of the sun, moon, and planets. It has recently been shown that by the Hellenistic era (if not earlier) they were able use a time-velocity graph to calculate the movements of Jupiter (Ossendrijver 2016), a procedure previously thought to have been discovered in 1400 CE. Such Mesopotamian astronomical observations and calculations provided the foundations for later Greek astronomers such as Aristarchos, Hipparchos, and Ptolemy in Hellenistic and Roman times. The Greeks and Romans were so aware of Babylonian preeminence in this field that for them the very name “Chaldean” came to mean “astronomer.”

Soon after 500 BCE Babylonian astronomers probably had worked out a mathematical formula for keeping the Mesopotamian lunar calendar synchronized with the solar year. Mesopotamians had long used a lunar calendar with alternating months of twenty-nine and thirty days, making the year only 354 days long. In early times, though, they recognized that the solar year was some eleven days longer, so once every three years or so they added an extra month to bring their lunar year back into harmony with the solar year. After determining the exact length of the solar year by the early part of

the fifth century BCE, Babylonian astronomers created a calendar that required adding an extra lunar month sometimes after three years and other times after two years, so that seven months were added every nineteen years. By the fourth century BCE, this intercalation was being done automatically using a mathematical formula⁵ instead of having to be ordered by the king.

Babylonian scholars, like their Assyrian counterparts, also kept systematic historical records. The Babylonian Chronicle and the *Ptolemaic Canon* (a list of kings and the lengths of their reigns that forms one of the foundations of our chronology of the ancient Near East) both begin with Nabonassar, the king of Babylon whose reign began in 747 BCE. These records went hand in hand with the careful astronomical observations, for as Joan Oates has noted (1979: 112), later Ptolemaic astronomers were able to calculate that “the Nabonassar Era began precisely at midday on 26 February 747 BC!” Scribes not only recorded their present-day events, but also appreciated their heritage from more ancient periods. Even though Aramaic was gradually replacing Akkadian as the common spoken language, Akkadian remained the official language of the state. Scholars studied and copied ancient texts, even sometimes using archaic Akkadian terms and expressions as well as Sumerian words in inscriptions. On occasion, they even modeled the inscribed cuneiform signs on those used in Old Akkadian inscriptions of the third millennium. Thus the Neo-Babylonians were essential in preserving the ancient traditions of Sumer. Even after the fall of Babylon to Persia, Babylonian scribes continued the scholastic traditions of the Neo-Babylonian age (especially the keeping of astronomical “diaries”). In this way, they kept Akkadian culture alive long after its institutions ceased to exist.

Notes

1. Because of biblical references to him, this king is one of the best-known ancient rulers. His name is usually written Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible (with Nebuchadrezzar as a variant), so the more familiar spelling has been used here. However, the actual Akkadian name, Nabu-kudurri-usur (“Nabu Protect My Offspring”), shows that Nebuchadrezzar is closer to the original.
2. Herodotus calls the negotiator of this treaty “Labynetos the Babylonian,” a name he uses for both Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus. However, if the treaty occurred in 585 BCE, the Babylonian negotiator would have had to be Nebuchadnezzar.
3. Herodotus claims that Cyrus had been Astyages’s vassal and that Cyrus rebelled and attacked his overlord. He further asserts that Cyrus won the war because Astyages’s own generals turned against him and went over to the Persian side. This whole account is questionable, and the contemporary *Nabonidus Chronicle* states that it was Astyages who

- initiated the attack against Cyrus rather than the other way around. See Briant (2002: 23–24, 31–33).
4. Stephanie Dalley (2013: 35–36) argues that Berossus may not have mentioned Nebuchadnezzar in connection with the gardens. Instead, the passage quoted by Josephus may have been written by one of the authors who quoted Berossus in the two centuries between Berossus and Josephus.
 5. Intercalary months were added in years 1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, and 17 of a 19-year cycle. In the first year of the cycle the extra month was added in the middle of the year, while in the other years it was added at the end of the year.

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The Achaemenid Persian Empire

In the sixth century BCE the Neo-Babylonian and Median Empires fell to the Persians, who were the first to rule a world empire. They ruled from the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean on the west to the Indus valley on the east and from the Black Sea and central Asia on the north to the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and southern Egypt on the south. For a time Persia even ruled portions of the Balkans and northern Greece. This vast empire not only controlled the territories of all previous Near Eastern empires, but it also blended many of their cultural elements and devised a kind of “federal” governmental system that combined a large amount of local autonomy with royal control. The Persian Empire had a lasting impact, as it knit together a vast array of peoples and cultures. Several tenets of Persia’s religion were eventually adopted by Judaism, from which they passed into later Christianity and Islam.

The Origins and Growth of the Persian Empire

The Florescence of the Lydian Kingdom (c. 685–c. 546 BCE)

Persia’s rise to power was surprisingly swift, but before Cyrus took over the ancient world, he had to contend with the two other great powers in the region, the Medes and the Lydians. The Lydians were an Indo-European-speaking people of western Asia Minor who primarily occupied the territory in and around the Hermus (modern Gediz Çay) and Cayster (modern Küçük Menderes) River valleys. Their language was related to Hittite and Luwian, so they were probably descendants of the people who had lived in this area in the second millennium BCE when it was known to the Hittites as Assuwa, later

part of the Arzawa Lands. Lydia’s main city was Sardis in the Hermus River valley at the foot of Mount Tmolus. No native Lydian accounts of their history have survived, so most of what we know about them comes from Herodotus and other Greek writers.

While there may have been a small kingdom centered on Sardis earlier, the first information we have about Lydia concerns the rise of the Mermnad dynasty, founded by Gyges (c. 685–644 BCE, see [Table 12.1](#)).¹ This king expanded Lydian control westward, initiating conflict with Greek settlements on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. He had difficulty maintaining his territory, however, when the Cimmerians and Scythians began raiding into western Anatolia after destroying the Phrygian Kingdom in 676 BCE. Assyrian sources indicate that sometime between 668 and 665 BCE, Gyges (called Guggu of Ludu by the Assyrians) sought Ashurbanipal’s aid against the frequent Cimmerian attacks. Gyges seems to have been temporarily successful against the Cimmerians, and may have become overconfident about his own strength, for in 654 BCE he supported Egypt’s revolt against Assyria. Thus, he had no one to call upon when Cimmerians again invaded Lydia. They partially destroyed Sardis and killed Gyges, but the kingdom survived. Despite further sporadic Cimmerian raids, Gyges’s successors, Ardys (c. 644–615 BCE) and Sadyattes (c. 615–610 BCE), were able to resume Lydia’s territorial expansion. They conquered several of the Greek cities of Ionia to the west and took control of much of the former Phrygian territory to the east.

Table 12.1 Probable Chronology of the Median, Lydian, and Persian Rulers

<i>Media</i>	<i>Lydia</i>	<i>Persia</i>
Deiokes (c. 700–647)	Gyges (c. 685–644)	Teispes (c. 650–620)
Phraortes (c. 647–625)	Ardys(c. 644–615)	Cyrus I (c. 620–590)
Cyaxares (c. 625–585)	Sadyattes (c. 615–610)	
Astyages (c.585–550)	Alyattes (c. 610–560)	Cambyses I (c. 590–559)
	Croesus (560–c. 546)	Cyrus II (559–530)
		Cambyses II (529–522)
		Bardiya (Smerdis) (522)
		Darius I (522–486)
		Xerxes (486–465)
		Artaxerxes I (465–424)
		Xerxes II (424)
		Darius II (423–405/4)
		Artaxerxes II (405/4–359)
		Artaxerxes III (358–338)
		Artaxerxes IV (337–336)
		Darius III (336–330)

Lydia became a small empire and entered its era of greatest prosperity and power during the reign of Alyattes (c. 610–560 BCE). He drove the Cimmerians out of Lydia and ended their incursions once and for all. The Assyrian Empire had just been destroyed and the Medes were raiding into eastern Anatolia, but Alyattes was able to extend his territory eastward into the old Hittite heartland. As we have seen in [Chapter 11](#), Herodotus's account of a long war between Lydians and Medes settled by a treaty in 585 BCE is very questionable. However, Alyattes does seem to have been able to halt any Median western expansion and make the Halys River Lydia's eastern boundary. When Alyattes's long reign ended in 560 BCE, he was buried north of Sardis in a marble burial chamber covered by the largest tumulus, or mound, in Anatolia (a type of burial borrowed from the Phrygians).

Alyattes's son and successor, Croesus (560–c. 546 BCE), enlarged the Lydian Empire to its greatest physical extent. He brought all of the Greek city-states in Asia Minor under Lydian control, becoming deeply influenced by Greek culture in the process. He imported Greek ceramics and hired Greek builders and sculptors to work on his buildings in Sardis. As a result, there was a tendency to blend elements of the two cultures, especially their religions. The Lydian mother goddess Kubele (Cybele) was identified with the Greek goddess Artemis and became the main deity worshipped at Ephesus. The Lydian god Leus was recognized as equivalent to Greek Zeus, and the Lydian god of wine, Baki, was adopted by the Greeks as Bacchus (which became another name for Dionysos, a fertility god derived from Thrace). Greeks regarded Croesus as extremely wealthy and extravagant, an impression created, in part, by his lavish donations to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi and to the archaic temple of Artemis/Kubele at Ephesus. Lydia's reputation for unlimited wealth also may have been due to its access to gold and silver sources and the introduction of coinage, its most important contribution to later civilization. Alyattes seems to have minted the first true coins (which were made of electrum). But the use of coins became more common during the reign of Croesus, so much so that Herodotus credited him with their invention. Greeks quickly recognized that these bits of electrum, gold, or silver (and later, bronze), whose purity and weight were guaranteed by the official stamp they bore, greatly facilitated trade. Miletus and other Ionian cities began minting coins of their own during the sixth century BCE, and the practice quickly spread to the Greek mainland and beyond. Despite his wealth and glory, Croesus was the last Lydian king. During the 540s BCE, his small empire fell to the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great.

The Creation of the Persian Empire

The Persians, another group of people who spoke an Indo-European language, were closely related to the Medes. When they are first mentioned in an inscription of Shalmaneser III in the 840s BCE, they were living in northwestern Iran in close proximity to the Medes. At least some of them were still in this region through the reign of Sargon II (721 to 705 BCE) whose inscriptions associate them with the Medes and the Mannaeans. Later, Sennacherib states that during his eighth campaign (692–691 BCE) Persians were allies of Elam and Anshan in southwestern Iran, and in 640 BCE, Ashurbanipal mentions a king of Parsua named Cyrus (Kurush in Persian, Kurash in Akkadian).² So, many scholars believe that groups of Persians began migrating southward after 800 BCE, reaching southwestern Iran sometime between 692 and 640 BCE. Others believe that the Assyrian records are referring to two or three different groups of Persians who had migrated into western Iran from the northeast rather than through the Caucasus. However they arrived there, by about 650 BCE, a group of Persians probably had made themselves masters of the southeastern part of the old Elamite kingdom, and their early rulers (see [Table 12.1](#)) adopted the old title, “King of Anshan.” Because of Persian dominance, this southeastern section of the Zagros chain in what is now Iran came to be known as Parsa (Persis to the Greeks, Persia in English), and today it is called Fars. The Persian kings from at least the time of Darius I traced their descent from an ancestor named Hakhamanish (better known in the form derived from Greek and Latin, Achaemenes), so from his reign on they are customarily called Achaemenians or the Achaemenid Line.³

A major problem for those who attempt to reconstruct Persian history is that most of our information on the Persians and their empire comes from others, particularly the Greek writers (especially Herodotus, Xenophon, Ctesias, and Diodorus of Sicily) and some references in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). These sources obviously see Persian affairs through the lens of their own particular interests and biases. While the internal texts of the empire are growing with new finds excavated and published, there are no historical narratives or annals. The empire’s texts consist of a few royal inscriptions, Babylonian chronicles, and various other native texts (such as Babylonian astronomical diaries, Babylonian economic archives, the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury tablets, the Egyptian Elephantine Papyri, scattered administrative tablets (Kandahar and Shiraz), and Aramaic letters and dockets from Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan).⁴ These are less distorted, but they give only a patchy view of the workings of the empire. Thus, what follows must of necessity be based largely on accounts whose accuracy cannot always

be determined, and the coverage will be biased in favor of the early Persian era (through the reign of Artaxerxes I) because that period was of particular concern to the Greeks and Judeans.

Though there is no evidence to support his claim, Herodotus says that the Persians were forced to become vassals of the Medes by Phraortes, the king who unified the Medes (see [Table 12.1](#)), and that they remained Median subjects until the reign of the Persian king Cyrus II, generally known as Cyrus the Great (559–530 BCE). Herodotus and other Greek historians preserved several legendary accounts of Cyrus’s origins and rise to power, some of which treat him as a royal castoff raised by shepherds in the tradition of Sargon of Akkad, Moses, and Romulus and Remus. Others claim he was a poor commoner who rose by stages to become cupbearer of the king and, finally, king himself. Cyrus was probably a member of the Persian royal line, however, as he stated on the Cyrus Cylinder, a Babylonian inscription of 539–538 BCE, which claims that he was the son of Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, the son of Teispes, each of whom bears the title “Great King, King of Anshan” (see [Document 12.1](#)).

Document 12.1 The Cyrus Cylinder

This Akkadian text was inscribed around 538 BCE on a nine-inch-long baked clay barrel. It presents Cyrus’s claim that Marduk had chosen him to replace the impious Nabonidus as ruler of Babylon and contains a statement of his policy of allowing groups that had been deported to return to their homelands if they wished and of supplying funds for rebuilding their ruined temples. This translation by W. Stiebing is based on those in Oppenheim (1955: 315–316) and Matthews and Benjamin (1991: 147–150).

(Nabonidus) made the worship of Marduk, the King of the Gods, into an abomination, and daily he used to do evil against Marduk’s city.... He tormented Babylon’s people with the yoke (of corvée labor) without relief; he ruined them all.

Because of the people’s complaints, (Marduk,) the Lord of the Gods, became furious and departed from their region. The other gods living among them also left their mansions, angry that Nabonidus had brought them into Babylon. But, Marduk... relented, his anger abated and he had mercy upon the people. He scanned all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him in the annual procession. Then he spoke the name of Cyrus, King of Anshan, declaring him to be the ruler of the entire world.... Marduk, the great lord, protector of his people, beheld with pleasure Cyrus’ good deeds and upright heart. Therefore he ordered Cyrus to march against Marduk’s own city of Babylon.... Marduk allowed Cyrus to enter Babylon without a battle, sparing Babylon any calamity. He delivered Nabonidus, the king who didn’t worship him, into Cyrus’ hands....

I am Cyrus, King of the World, Great King, Legitimate King, King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad, King of the Four Corners of the Earth, son of Cambyses, Great King, King of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, Great King, King of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, Great King, King of Anshan, of a family which always exercised king-ship, (a monarch) whose rule Bel (Marduk) and Nebo love and whom they want as king to please their hearts. All the kings of the entire world from the Upper to the Lower Sea—those seated in throne rooms or living in other types of buildings as well as all the sheikhs of the tent dwellers of the West land—brought me their heavy tribute and kissed my feet in Babylon. To (regions)... as far as Ashur and Susa, Akkad, Eshnunna, the towns of Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der and the region of the Gutians, I returned the divine images which used to live there and restored the sanctuaries which had been in ruins for a long time. I also gathered all the former inhabitants of these places and returned them to their homes. Furthermore, at the command of Marduk, the Great Lord, I resettled in their former chapels, the places that make them happy, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus, to the anger of the Lord of the Gods, had brought into Babylon.... Moreover, I endeavored to repair their temples.

This genealogy seems to be confirmed by a royal seal whose Elamite inscription reads “Cyrus (I?) of Anshan, son (or descendant) of Teispes.” Herodotus claims Cyrus was also related to the royal lines of Lydia and Media. His mother, Mandane, supposedly was the daughter of the Median king Astyages and the Lydian princess he married as part of the peace agreement between the two peoples. However, the information and chronology used by Herodotus is hopelessly confused at this point. Cyrus II was an adult when he came to the throne in 559 BCE, but the Median-Lydian marriage had supposedly taken place only in 585 BCE, the date of the solar eclipse that ended the war between the two kingdoms. The twenty-six years that elapsed between those dates is not enough time for the birth and maturation of Cyrus’s mother and of Cyrus himself.

Greek historians claim that Phraortes and Cyaxares had organized the Median army along Assyrian lines, separating it into divisions of archers, infantry, and cavalry. In turn, Cyrus supposedly copied the Median military structure. According to the Greek writer Xenophon, Cyrus developed the famous Persian cavalry, training Persians to fight from horseback in the Assyrian and Median manner. The Greeks also claimed that Cyrus copied Median organizational patterns for the court, government, and treasury. These assertions, however, are based on the Greek view that before Cyrus the Persians were simple, somewhat backward pastoralists. This view is unlikely in the extreme. Cyrus’s predecessors were *kings* of Anshan, not nomadic chieftains, and they had inherited much of the civilization and organization of ancient Elam (Potts 2005: 22–23). In fact, it is probable that Herodotus and other Greek writers transferred what they knew of the Persia of their time

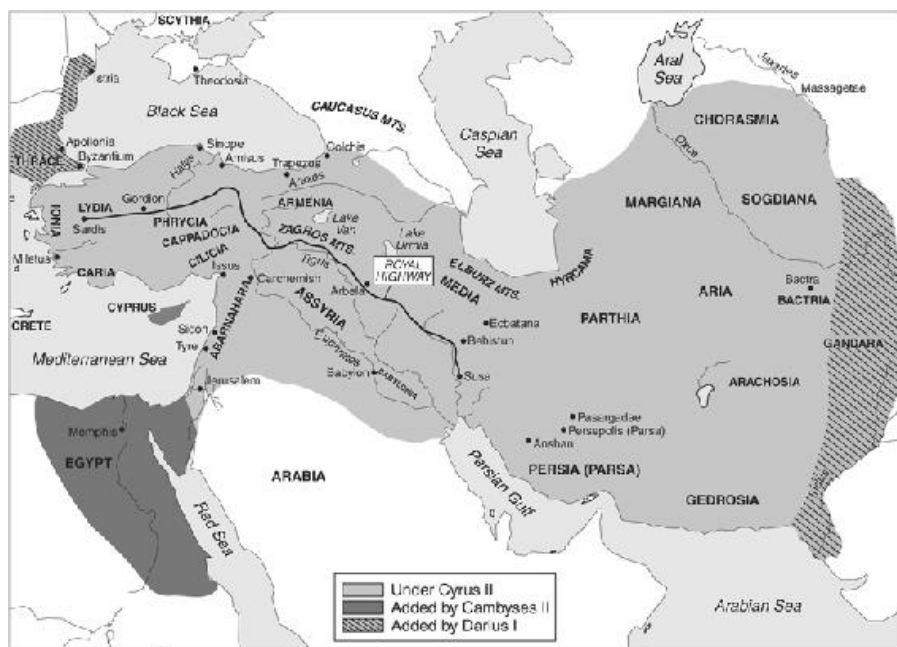
back to a hypothetical Median Empire about which they knew virtually nothing (Briant 2002: 24–27).

As we saw in [Chapter 11](#), the Babylonian *Nabonidus Chronicle* indicates that the Medes under Astyages attacked Cyrus for unknown reasons (possibly because he had been a vassal and had declared his independence as the Greek sources claim). Both Greek and Babylonian sources agree that in 550 BCE, while the armies of the Medes and Persians were preparing to do battle, the troops of Astyages mutinied. They handed their king over to Cyrus and accepted him as their ruler. Cyrus took much of the treasure of the Median capital, Ecbatana (modern Hamadan), back to Anshan. But the real prizes he obtained were Media's horses and grazing lands as well as its manpower reserves. Instead of treating the Medes as slaves or captive labor, he integrated their upper classes into the Persian ruling class (which was itself already probably a mixture of Elamites and Persians). He appointed many Medes to high governmental positions, and gave some of their generals similar positions within his own army. This caused the Medes to regard Cyrus as their valid king, and outsiders later found it difficult to distinguish Medes from Persians. In fact, the Greeks eventually used the two ethnic designations as synonyms, and the Persian king's title in the Hebrew Bible is "King of Persia and Media."

Croesus, king of Lydia, probably saw the demise of Median power as an opportunity to renew Lydian expansion into eastern Anatolia. According to the well-known story by Herodotus, Croesus asked the Oracle of Delphi in Greece whether he should attack the Persians and was told that if he did, he would destroy a mighty empire. Thinking this oracle promised him victory, Croesus led his forces across the Halys River around 546 BCE.⁵ Cyrus quickly responded, drove back the Lydian army and, after a brief siege, captured Sardis, Lydia's capital. Too late, Croesus realized that the mighty empire his attack had destroyed was his own. Cyrus returned to Ecbatana with Croesus as his prisoner, leaving an army to finish the conquest of western Asia Minor by subduing the Greek city-states along the coast.

During the next few years, Cyrus seems to have spent most of his time conquering central and eastern Iran. By 539 BCE, he felt strong enough to move against the Neo-Babylonian Empire. He defeated Belshazzar and Nabonidus in battle (see [Chapter 11](#)) and met little resistance when he marched into the great city of Babylon. Herodotus claims that Babylon surrendered so easily because Cyrus diverted most of the Euphrates' flow north of the city, allowing the Persian army to wade along the riverbed and enter the city through its water gates. The Babylonian account, however, gives a different version of Babylon's fall. Cyrus first attacked Opis (a city on the Tigris near Baghdad) and slaughtered its inhabitants; Belshazzar was killed and Nabonidus fled. It's no wonder Babylon surrendered without a battle. When Babylon fell, all of the

territory it had ruled came under Persian control, making Cyrus master of almost the entire Near East (see [Map 12.1](#)). Cyrus then adopted the old Akkadian titles, “Great King, king of Sumer and Akkad, King of the Four Quarters (the world).”



[Map 12.1](#) The Achaemenid Persian Empire

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

Cyrus’s propaganda depicted him as a good king, selected by Marduk to oust the impious Nabonidus, restore order, and reconstruct Mesopotamia’s temples (see [Document 12.1](#)). Certainly the Judean exiles appreciated his rule. A Judean prophet of the time hailed Cyrus as Yahweh’s “anointed one” (messiah) in language reminiscent of Cyrus’s own proclamation (compare Isaiah 45:1–4 with [Document 12.1](#), paragraph 2). To court favor among his subjects, Cyrus began a policy of restoring temples and returning divine statues to their chapels ([Document 12.1](#), paragraph 3). According the Bible, in 538 BCE, Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Judean exiles to return and rebuild the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. Thus, the “Babylonian Exile” officially came to an end. Cyrus’s lenient policies probably allowed for a smooth transition of power in many parts of the empire. At Babylon, economic documents went from dating according to the regnal year of Nabonidus to that of the Persian kings, without interruption.

As previously mentioned, Cyrus’s predecessors had designated themselves

kings of Anshan, and the city of Anshan (modern Tal-i-Malyan), part of the ancient kingdom of Elam, seems to have been their capital. It is natural then, that Elamite culture exerted a strong influence over the Persians. In fact, the people we call Persians may have been formed from a blending of Indo-European Iranian groups with the native Elamite population of the area around Anshan. The Elamites influenced the way Persians dressed and also probably passed on most or all of the organizational structures for government, society, and the military that Greek writers credited to Median influence. Moreover, the Persians used the Elamite language and its cuneiform script for their early inscriptions. After the conquest of Babylon, Persian kings also made inscriptions in Akkadian, and they probably used Aramaic for correspondence, as it had become the common language of trade and commerce throughout the Near East. Nevertheless, Elamite continued to be used for writing in addition to these other languages. On the other hand, Persian seems to have remained only a spoken language until the time of Darius I.

After creating an empire, Cyrus decided to establish a new capital at Pasargadae (at the site now known as Murghab) in Persia. According to the Greeks, this was where Cyrus defeated King Astyages. While he continued to use earlier palaces at Babylon, Susa (the old Elamite capital), and Ecbatana (the Median capital), he built an elegant palace for himself at Pasargadae. The plan of his palace, which was essentially a columned hall, reflects influences from the Elamite pre-Persian population of Anshan and from the Medes, but its doorways exhibit the work of Greek and Lydian stonemasons. Cyrus's capital was unique in many ways. It was situated in a vast garden, probably the precursor to the later Islamic period Persian gardens. This was the *pairidaeza*—a walled garden that gave us the word paradise. Cyrus also built himself a grand tomb on the site. According to Greek accounts, Alexander's soldiers discovered the body of Cyrus lying in a gold sarcophagus, with a gold couch and rich textiles, jewelry, and goods, inside the tomb. An inscription on the tomb said, "O mortal, I am Cyrus, who founded the Persian Empire, and was king of Asia. Grudge me not therefore this monument" (Arrian VI.29.4–11). Though the monument still stands today, there is no trace of an original inscription or, of course, of Cyrus's riches.

Cyrus then seems to have spent the rest of his reign extending his empire to the northeast, conquering Bactria (the area of modern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and the Oxus region (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). It was while campaigning against one of the nomadic tribes of the Central Asian steppe in 530 BCE that he fell in battle, making his son, Cambyses (Kambujiya in Persian), king. Despite his death, Cyrus's final military campaign seems to have been successful, for Cambyses II (530 to 522 BCE) inherited a stable kingdom that suffered no territorial losses along its northeastern frontier. The

only remaining trouble spot was Egypt, which had taken control of Cyprus after the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. So, Cambyses began making preparations for the conquest of Egypt, a project Cyrus seems to have planned but had not lived to accomplish. Cambyses assembled a large fleet whose ships and men were supplied mainly by the vassal Phoenicians and Ionian Greeks, and he made arrangements with the Arabs to supply his army with water skins during the march across northern Sinai. Then, in 525 BCE, the Persian forces invaded the eastern Delta. A contingent of Greek mercenaries hired by the Egyptians defected to the Persians and they routed the rest of the Egyptian army. Pharaoh Psammetichus (Psamtik) III and his remaining forces fled to Memphis, but the city fell after a very brief siege by Cambyses's army and fleet. Herodotus depicts Cambyses as a ruthless, egotistical, paranoid tyrant who, following his conquest, showed no regard for Egyptian religion and culture. However, contemporary Egyptian evidence tells a different story. After sending the captive Psammetichus off to Susa, Cambyses adopted an Egyptian name (Mesuti-Re, "son of Re") and pharaonic titles and took care to respect Egyptian temples and religious customs, thus winning the acceptance of most of the Egyptian people (Cook 1983: 48–49; Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 2, 662–664; Briant 2002: 55–61). He quickly established his dominion over all of Egypt and even seems to have extended his rule into northern Nubia just south of the Nile's first cataract. The rulers of Libya and Cyrene to the west hastened to send Cambyses tokens of submission, and Cyprus also surrendered voluntarily. For the first time in history, the entire Near East was unified into a single vast empire.

The Achaemenid Empire at Its Height

Crisis and Restoration

In 522 BCE Cambyses began the trek back to Persia, but on the way home he died, possibly as Herodotus claims (*Histories*, III. 64), from an accidental leg wound from his dagger while he was mounting his horse. Both Darius I's inscription at Behistun (or Bisitun) and Herodotus's narrative (which probably derived ultimately from Darius's account) claim that Cambyses had previously murdered his brother, Bardiya (whom Herodotus calls Smerdis). Supposedly, a Median look-alike named Gaumata pretended to be the dead prince and incited revolt while Cambyses was still alive (see [Document 12.2](#)), prompting

his fateful decision to return to Persia. Supported by six prominent members of the upper class (and probably by Cambyses's army), Darius, a high-ranking army officer who claimed to be a relative of Cyrus, opposed the rebels. In a relatively short time, he killed the usurper and ascended the throne as Darius I (Persian Darayawush, 522–486 BCE). Darius's account of these events, of course, was meant to support his claim to the throne, and many scholars doubt its accuracy. His genealogy ([Document 12.2](#)) is especially suspicious. Elsewhere he stated that his father and grandfather were both still alive when he became king. So, if they were really descended from Teispes as he asserts (his great-grandfather was supposedly a brother of Cyrus I), both his grandfather and father would have had a more direct claim to the throne than he did. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that the murder of Cambyses's younger brother could have been kept secret for years while Cambyses was conquering Egypt (as Darius's inscription and the Greek accounts claim it was) or that a Median imposter could have fooled members of the Persian upper class. Thus, most historians today believe that Darius was the usurper and that the man he overthrew was in fact Bardiya, the son of Cyrus the Great and brother of Cambyses (e.g., Cook 1983: 50–53; Roaf 1990: 207; Briant 1992: 238, 2002: 97–106; Kuhrt 1995: 664–666; Waters 2005: 12–21). Bardiya probably took the throne only after his brother died on the march back from Egypt (Briant 2002: 101–105). To consolidate his new position, Darius quickly married Cyrus's surviving daughters and granddaughter, thus assuring that his children would be the only legitimate descendants of Cyrus.

Document 12.2 Darius's Behistun Inscription

The following excerpts are from the inscription Darius I had chiseled in Elamite, Akkadian, and Persian to accompany the relief depicting his triumph over Gaumata and the other rebels carved high upon a cliff at a place traditionally known as Behistun (or Bisitun) overlooking the main road from Ecbatana to Babylon (see [Figure 12.1](#)). The translation is basically that of Kent (1950: 119–120, 131) but using the more familiar Greek forms of the Persian names and incorporating changes made by Briant (2002: 99). The language has also been modernized (e.g., “Darius the King says” for Kent’s “Saith Darius the King”). W. Stiebing has added the material in square brackets.

I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of the countries, son of Hystaspes, grandson of Arsames, an Achaemenian.

Darius the King says: My father was Hystaspes; Hystaspes's father was Arsames; Arsames's father was Ariaramnes; Ariaramnes's father was Teispes; Teispes's father

was Achaemenes....

When Cambyses had gone off to Egypt, the people became evil. After that, the Lie waxed great in the country, both in Persia and in Media and in the other provinces.

Darius the King says: Afterwards, there was one man, a Magian named Gaumata.... He lied to the people saying: "I am Bardiya, the son of Cyrus, brother of Cambyses." Then all the people rebelled against Cambyses, and went over to him, both in Persia and Media and the other provinces. He seized the kingdom.... After that, Cambyses died of natural causes.... I sought the help of Ahura Mazda and Ahura Mazda bore me aid. Ten days had passed in the month of Bagayadi, when I with a few men killed Gaumata the Magian and his principal followers.... I took the kingdom from him; by the favor of Ahura Mazda I became king. Ahura Mazda bestowed the kingdom upon me....

Darius the King says: This is what I did by the favor of Ahura Mazda in the year after I became king. I fought nineteen battles. By the favor of Ahura Mazda I smote them and took nine kings prisoner. One was named Gaumata, a Magos; he lied and said, "I am Bardiya, the son of Cyrus." He made Persia rebel. One, named Atrina, an Elamite, lied and said, "I am king in Elam"; he made Elam rebel against me. One, named Nidintu-Bel, a Babylonian, lied and said, "I am Nebuchadrezzar, the son of Nabonidus." He made Babylon rebel.... [The other six who are named incited rebellions in Media, Sagartia, Margiana, and once more in Persia, Elam, and Babylonia.]

The crisis was not over when Darius became king, however. When news of his accession spread through the empire, a new series of revolts occurred, especially in Media, Babylonia, Elam, the Iranian plateau, and within Persia itself. The fact that much of the Persian heart-land rose against Darius is another indicator that many of the Persian upper class did not accept his claim to be the legitimate successor of Cambyses. However, his supporters and their armies fought on several fronts against the rebel forces. Most of the rebellions were quelled only after more than a year of hard fighting, and Egypt was not brought back under control until 518 BCE. To celebrate his victory, Darius had a relief depicting his triumph over Gaumata and the other rebels carved high upon a cliff at Bisitun (traditionally spelled Behistun) overlooking the main road from Ecbatana to Babylon (see [Figure 12.1](#)). Cuneiform inscriptions in Akkadian and Elamite presenting Darius's version of the events surrounding his assumption of kingship accompanied this monument in the heart of the former rebel territory. However, just before it was completed, Darius seems to have decided that its message should be proclaimed in his native tongue as well. So, he declared, "according to the will of [the god] Ahura Mazda I have made the writing of a different sort, in Aryan, which did not exist before" (Cook 1983: 68 with slight modifications by W. Stiebing). Persian scribes, probably influenced by Aramaic writing, adapted the cuneiform script to write Old Persian, creating a simplified syllabic writing system that is almost like an alphabet—there are only forty-six signs, of which six are seldom-used

logograms (Waters 1996; Huyse 1999). They then added an Old Persian version of the text to the Behistun monument and smoothed the cliff below and on the sides of the relief so it could not be reached and defaced. In the mid-nineteenth century, the British scholar Henry Rawlinson was able to copy and decipher the Old Persian inscription, and its cuneiform script helped him and other scholars eventually decipher the Akkadian and Elamite inscriptions, as well. Because of this breakthrough, philologists gained the ability to read the voluminous Mesopotamian inscriptions and tablets that were being uncovered at the same time (Stiebing 1993: 85–118; Walker 1998: 58–62; Fagan 2007: 16–70).



Figure 12.1 Relief and Inscription of Darius I at Behistun, Iran

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Reorganization of the Empire

Once Darius had suppressed all the revolts against his rule, he went on campaigns to expand the empire in the east, north, and west. His armies conquered “Indian” territories along the Indus River and attacked Scythian tribes north of the Black Sea, although this campaign was ultimately unsuccessful. He brought Libya and Thrace into the empire and concluded treaties with Macedonia and Athens, an event that would later have ramifications for the Greek-Persian wars (see the next section). In Egypt, he

reversed some of Cambyses's fiscal measures and restored the privileges of the Egyptian priesthoods. The Persian Empire reached its greatest extent under Darius I, "from the Scythians who are beyond Sogdiana to Ethiopia, from Sind to Saris" (Darius's Persepolis relief, Brosius 2000: 76, no. 134).

Darius was also a good administrator and soon began to reorganize the empire, probably building upon administrative structures initiated by Cyrus and Cambyses. Cyrus and Cambyses had appointed governors (called satraps, "protectors of the empire") for sections of the empire (called satrapies) and assessed tribute, but Darius probably made the administrative and fiscal structures more uniform and systematic. We do not know how many satrapies there were under Cyrus and Cambyses, but under Darius there were twenty (though the number increased over time). Each was assessed a fixed annual tax (tribute) valued in silver (except for the Indian satrapy, the wealthiest one whose tribute was valued and paid in gold). The amount each satrapy paid was determined by the productivity of its land and the wealth of its people. Persia, the only region of the empire that had not been conquered, was not part of a satrapy. It was ruled directly by the king and paid no taxes, though Persian landowners had to supply infantry, cavalry, or chariot troops to the army depending on the extent of their holdings. The seminomadic pastoral tribes that lived in the Zagros Mountains and the Arabs were the only other groups not fully integrated into the empire; they were treated as allies. Darius (and his successors) gave gifts to the chieftains of these difficult-to-conquer seminomadic groups, and in exchange, they helped the Persians in various ways. The Zagros chieftains protected the major roads through the mountains, and the Arab sheikhs helped the Persian army find routes through the desert.

A satrap (generally a Persian or Median aristocrat) governed each satrapy, and a garrison of Persian troops was stationed in each to keep order, enforce the king's edicts, and collect taxes. Most of the satrapies were very large, and some contained several different ethnic groups or nations who were allowed to manage their own local affairs and maintain their traditional religions and customs. Local rulers appointed by the Persian king usually governed such subunits of the satrapy. So, for example, within the satrapy called Abarnahara ("Beyond the [Euphrates] River," that is, the Levant and Cyprus), the city-states of Syria and Phoenicia had their own local governments, as did the regions of Cyprus, Ashdod (the entire area of Philistia), Judah, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, and Idumaea (Edom). Within the Lydian and Carian satrapies of western Asia Minor, the Ionian Greek cities continued to be governed by their own tyrants as they had been before the Persian conquest. This policy was a hallmark of Persian rule and helped keep subjugated territories content with Persian rule (Wiesehöfer 2009: 86).

Darius appointed many of his closest and most trusted relatives to the post

of satrap, but he (and probably his predecessors on the Persian throne as well) also utilized several safeguards to keep these powerful officials in check. The garrison was directly responsible to the king, as were the satrap's secretary and treasurer. In addition, there were special officials called "the king's eyes and ears," whose duty was to report on the actions of the satrap directly to the king. All of these independent sources of information and the speed of communication between the satrapies and the king discouraged disloyalty and conspiracy.

Darius's restoration of order and stability brought prosperity as well as peace to the empire. The Persians improved agriculture throughout the empire by supporting the introduction of new crops and technologies. From India, they brought rice into Mesopotamia and sesame into Egypt. They introduced pistachio nuts into Syria from Anatolia. During their invasion of Greece, the Persians planted alfalfa, a common crop in Media, to provide fodder for their horses. For thousands of years, the Mesopotamians had grown flax primarily to obtain oil from its seeds, but the Persians encouraged more extensive use of its plant fibers to make cloth. Darius and his successors also increased the arable land within Persia through irrigation. To prevent evaporation, the water had to be brought from the mountains in underground channels whose construction was probably modeled on the mining tunnels of Urartu. Eventually, similar irrigation channels were created in other parts of the empire, as well.



Figure 12.2 Gold Daric, c. Fourth Century BCE

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Trade and commerce also benefited from Darius's actions. He standardized weights and measures and, though Lydian coins continued to be used, he introduced the first Persian royal coinage ([Figure 12.2](#)). Persian gold *darics* are found in many locations around the empire. Nevertheless, numerous parts of the empire continued to rely on local currencies minted by satraps (in the west) or on barter as the means of exchange (in the east). The daric's main impact therefore, was the spread of the image of the king as "royal hero" (Wiesehöfer 2009: 84). Darius also upgraded the overland routes and waterways along which trade moved. The Persians became noted for building roads and ensuring the safety of those who traversed them. They maintained,

straightened, and improved the major roads that already crisscrossed the empire west of the Zagros, and they built new roads to connect the eastern provinces to one another and to the western portion of the empire. In places where conditions were not ideal, the king's engineers cut ruts into the roadbeds at the standard width of wagon and chariot axles. These deep grooves kept wheeled vehicles from going off the road. The king stationed troops at river crossings, mountain passes, and other key points along the roads so that traffic could be monitored and controlled. These guard posts not only deterred and limited the extent of revolts, they also made the roads safer for peaceful travel and trade by suppressing banditry. The Royal Highway, the most famous of the Persian roads, ran over mountain chains, across rivers, and through valleys from Susa in Elam to Sardis in Lydia (with an extension to Ephesus on the Aegean coast), a distance of almost 1,700 miles (see [Map 12.1](#)). To aid waterborne trade, Darius completed construction of a 90-mile canal that had been begun but abandoned by the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II around 600 BCE. This 150-foot-wide channel connected the Bitter Lakes at the edge of the eastern Delta to one another and to the Pelusiac Branch of the Nile on the north and to the Gulf of Suez (a branch of the Red Sea) on the south. The entire route was about 125 miles long, compared to the modern 107-mile Suez Canal that it anticipated by 2,350 years.

For almost instantaneous communications, principally warnings of revolts or invasions, the Persians used fire signals from one hilltop station to another. The Persians' excellent transportation network also made it possible, however, for them to use a "pony express" system to rapidly carry more complex messages to and from the farthest reaches of their vast empire. The Persians copied this system from the Assyrians, setting up way stations with supplies, horses, and trusted messengers at about 15-mile intervals along major roads. Only royal messengers or other individuals bearing sealed authorization could use these stations and their supplies. Herodotus claims that messages, passed from rider to rider, each utilizing several fresh horses and continuing night and day, took only seven days to go from Sardis to Susa via the Royal Highway, normally a three-month trip for a caravan. To accomplish this feat, the royal messengers would have had to average almost 250 miles every twenty-four hours! Thus, they earned Herodotus's encomium (*Histories*, VIII. 98), which (in a slightly different translation from that of W. Stiebing used here) has been taken as the motto for the U.S. Postal Service:

Nothing human travels as fast as these Persian messengers.... Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor darkness of night prevents these men from completing their designated stages with utmost speed.

During his long reign Darius put considerable resources towards building

projects and the construction of a new grand imperial center. He continued to use Ecbatana (as a summer palace) and Pasargadae (the site of coronations), but he made Babylon and the old Elamite capital of Susa his administrative centers. Later in his reign he also built a palace and ceremonial center at a new location and named it Parsa, the same name that was applied to his country (Persia) and people (Persians). This site is generally known, though, by the designation the Greeks gave it—Persepolis (“City of the Persians”) (see [Figure 12.4](#)). Persepolis was a testament to the magnificence of the king and the embodiment of a new “Achaemenid” royal ideology (see below *Persian Architecture and Art*). Darius chose to be buried there, and instead of constructing a tomb like that of Cyrus, he had his sepulcher cut into the cliffs at Naksh-e Rostam, just north of Persepolis.

Wars with the Greeks

During the reign of Darius I, Persia became embroiled in a series of conflicts with the Greeks, first those in Asia Minor who were part of the Persian Empire, and then their city-states within Greece itself. Because of the major role Greece would play in the development of Western civilization, Western historians usually see these Greek-Persian Wars as extremely significant (see, e.g., Green 1996; De Souza 2003; Cawkwell 2005; Holland 2005). It is important to note, however, that to the Persians these wars were minor conflicts on the fringes of their vast empire. They were obviously of far more consequence to the Greeks than they were to the Persians. Since the only sources for this conflict come from Greek authors, primarily Herodotus, we are entirely reliant on the Greek version of events.

The conflict between the two regions goes back to Darius’s actions against the Scythians north of the Black Sea around 514 BCE. He crossed the Hellespont on a bridge of ships, advanced through Thrace and then crossed the Danube on another floating bridge. The Persians may have been attempting to punish the Scythians for past raids into Anatolia and weaken them so they could not conduct future ones. Unable to subdue the Scythians, Darius had to backtrack to Thrace, where he organized the conquered territory south of the Danube into a satrapy that would act as a buffer state against the seminomads and as a source of timber and metals. Then he returned to Susa. Ionian Greeks, who provided many of the ships for the bridges and most of the men who guarded them, regarded this campaign as a defeat and probably were shocked to discover that the feared Persian army was not invincible after all. Even so,

Persia's power extended across the Aegean Sea, for in 507, the Athenians asked for Persian help against Sparta.

Despite Persian acceptance of local autonomy and support for local cults and temples, in 499 BCE, the Ionian cities revolted against Darius. Herodotus claims that the personal frustrations and fears of Aristagoras, tyrant of Miletus, led him to promote the revolt after his failure to conquer the island of Naxos (*Histories*, V. 28–36). There must have been considerably more behind it than this, for in addition to the Ionian Greeks, the Greeks in Cyprus joined the revolt, as did some Persians living in Sardis. Under Persian rule, the tyrants of the various eastern Greek city-states had not been able to expand their territories or take radical measures to ease economic discontent, practices often followed by tyrants on the Greek mainland. Thus, their popularity and influence had declined. These factors probably led some eastern Greek cities to depose their tyrants, an act of rebellion against Persia (which had appointed them). In self-defense, other tyrants took up leadership of the revolt.

The Ionians appealed to their fellow Greeks on the mainland for help, but only Athens (which sent twenty ships) and Eretria (which sent five) responded positively. Athenian and Eretrian contingents joined the Ionian forces when they marched against Sardis in 498 BCE, captured it and, for some unknown reason, burned it to the ground. Somewhat fancifully, Herodotus recounts that when Darius heard about this action, he was infuriated that mainland Greeks had participated in this destruction of a great city, and he appointed someone to constantly remind him of his vow to take revenge against Eretria and Athens once he had suppressed the Ionian revolt. Darius responded quickly and forcefully. The army subdued Cyprus with the help of a Phoenician fleet, then Darius sent several armies to attack different Ionian cities at the same time. In 494 BCE, a Persian army besieged the city of Miletus, the leader of the revolt, while a fleet of 600 Phoenician, Egyptian, Cilician, and Cypriot ships arrived to blockade it by sea. The large Persian fleet met 353 Greek ships in battle at Lade, off the coast near Miletus. After several Greek contingents sailed home when they were promised leniency, the Persians virtually destroyed the remainder of the Ionian fleet. They took Miletus, killed or deported its surviving population to Mesopotamia, and the revolt collapsed.

Except for Miletus, the Persians treated the defeated Ionian cities tolerantly. The Persians reinstated some tyrants, but also installed democratic governments in most of the recaptured cities in place of their earlier tyrannies. These democracies gave at least some power to the lower classes that tended to be more amenable to Persian rule. The Ionians also had to agree to settle future disputes between their cities by Persian arbitration rather than warfare. Darius's envoy reassessed their tribute payments on the same scale used previously and the assessment remained unchanged during the next two

generations.

Darius now could turn his attention to the mainland Greek states that had participated in the Ionian revolt. In 492 BCE, he sent an expedition commanded by his son-in-law, Mardonius, to secure Thrace and Macedonia. Perhaps this force also intended to attack Athens and Eretria as Herodotus says, but we will never know. A storm destroyed many of its ships while they were rounding the Mt. Athos promontory in Chalcidice and the survivors had to return to Asia Minor. Two years later, Darius sent a fleet carrying a 15,000- to 20,000-man force directly across the Aegean to punish the two Greek states. It captured Eretria on the island of Euboea with minimal difficulty, and then landed near Marathon on the eastern shore of Attica. The Persians brought with them Hippias, the former tyrant of Athens, probably to reinstate him as ruler. Approximately 10,000 Athenian hoplites (heavy-armed infantry soldiers), supplemented by a 600-man contingent from the city of Plataea, marched to Marathon to repel the Persian invasion.

The resulting battle was legendary. The Greek forces rushed the more lightly armed Persian infantry while the Persian cavalry was aboard ship and inflicted heavy casualties (Green 1996: 30–40; Holland 2005: 171–205). The Persians supposedly suffered more than 6,000 casualties, as opposed to only 192 Greek dead. The famous episode of the messenger who ran the approximately twenty-six miles to Athens with news of the Athenian victory and then died of exhaustion is a later legend, and regrettably, unlikely to be true. The Persian fleet then sailed around Attica, but the leaders of the still-considerable force decided against landing in the face of the Greek army that had marched all day across Attica to get into position. The fleet sailed home and the first Persian attempt to conquer Athens ended in failure.

Darius did not get the chance to return to Greece, as he died four years later in 486 BCE. After crushing major revolts in Egypt and Babylon, his son and successor, Xerxes I (486 to 465 BCE), led a huge army across the Hellespont into Greece in 480 BCE. Herodotus claims that the Persian army was over 2 million men and 1,327 ships, although a more reasonable estimate is between 180,000 and 210,000 men and 650–700 ships (Green 1996: 58–62). Northern Greek cities submitted to Xerxes, but Athens and Sparta and the southern cities committed themselves to fight. The first confrontation was at Thermopylae, a pass leading to the Attic plain. The Persian army quickly destroyed the small Greek force that was sent to delay them (the famous “300” Spartans who sacrificed themselves so that the rest of the Greek army could retreat), and the Persian fleet forced the outnumbered Greek fleet to withdraw (Cartledge 2006). Xerxes’s army advanced into Attica and burned the city of Athens. But the Athenian population had taken refuge on the island of Salamis just off Attica’s western coast, protected by the Greek fleet stationed in the narrow straits

between Salamis and the mainland. The Persians crowded too many of their ships into the narrow waterway, making it impossible for them to maneuver properly when the straits turned choppy and the Greek vessels rowed out to attack. Eventually, the Persian fleet was forced to withdraw from the narrow waterway and Xerxes sent the navy home and followed with the bulk of his army.

Xerxes left a strong detachment under Mardonius to hold the subjugated portions of Greece. Presumably Persian reinforcements would have been sent in the spring to complete the conquest of Greece, but the Greeks struck first. Early in the spring of 479 BCE, a Greek army consisting mostly of Spartans and Athenians defeated Mardonius's troops near the city of Plataea. Mardonius was killed and the remnants of his army fled from Greece. Soon afterward, the Greek fleet destroyed a large portion of the Persian fleet at Mykale on the coast of Asia Minor, effectively ending Persian intrusions in the Aegean. During the following decades, Greeks drove the Persians out of their satrapy in Thrace, and Greek fleets raided Lycia in southwestern Asia Minor and destroyed another Persian fleet at the mouth of the Eurymedon River in southern Asia Minor. In the midst of this ongoing struggle, Xerxes and his crown prince, Darius, were assassinated in 465 BCE by three courtiers who made a younger prince, Artaxerxes I, king (465 to 424 BCE). By 448 BCE both sides appear to have been tired of the conflict and generally agreed to terms, though no formal treaty seems to have been signed. This so-called Peace of Callias gave Persia dominion over the Ionian city-states while granting them internal autonomy. The Greeks, for their part, agreed not to interfere with Persian possessions, and Persia agreed to stay out of the Aegean. The so-called Peace did not prevent the skirmishes that took place between the two powers over the next eighty years. Herodotus may have portrayed these wars as the struggle of humanity against barbarism, Europe against Asia, but in reality, it was merely the defense by a small contingent of city-states of their political independence. The results of the war were far more consequential for the Greeks than the Persians, for they helped create a Panhellenic or "Greek" identity (Wiesehöfer 2009: 74).

Debating the Evidence: Herodotus, "Father of History" or "Father of Lies"?

Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE) is one of our most important sources for the history of the eastern Mediterranean during the sixth and early fifth centuries and our primary source on the Greek-Persian Wars. But how factual are his writings?

His work has been praised by some and criticized by others since antiquity. The famous Roman statesman, Cicero, though admitting that Herodotus's work was full of legends and fables, proclaimed him the "Father of History" (*On the Laws*, I. 5), a title that has stuck. On the other hand, Plutarch and Lucian of Samosata called him a liar. Thucydides, while not mentioning Herodotus by name, was almost certainly including him when he poured scorn on "prose chroniclers" who are more interested in public acclaim than in telling the truth and "whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject-matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology" (Warner 1954: 24).

Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus on the coast of Asia Minor around 484 BCE, soon after the accession of Xerxes I as king of Persia. At that time, Halicarnassus and other Greek city-states in Asia Minor were part of the Persian Empire. While Herodotus was a child, Xerxes undertook his expedition to Greece (480–479 BCE) and during Herodotus's "formative years" memories of the earlier Ionian revolt (499–494 BCE) and Darius I's invasion of Greece (490 BCE) still would have been relatively fresh in the minds of many residents of Ionia and Greece. Probably due to civil strife in Halicarnassus, in his early twenties Herodotus seems to have begun traveling, visiting (he claims) Samos, the Black Sea region, Babylon, Phoenicia, Egypt, and Cyrene, collecting material for his *Histories*.⁶ His journeys through the Persian Empire lasted about twelve or thirteen years, and by the end of this period, he probably had completed at least the first edition of the first part his work. Although he returned to Halicarnassus for a time around 450 BCE, soon afterward he left Asia Minor and moved to Athens, possibly because his writings had found little favor in his hometown (Rawlinson 1956: vii). Athens gave Herodotus a warmer reception, and its leading intellectuals, especially the sophist philosopher Protagoras and the tragic poets Aeschylus and Sophocles, seem to have had a profound influence on the final version of his *Histories*. In 443 BCE Herodotus sailed with some Athenians to establish the colony of Thurii in southern Italy, where he seems to have died around 425 BCE.

Herodotus believed that the wars between the Greeks and the Persians were the most important events in the history of the world, so he set out to prevent "the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians [Asians] from losing their due meed [i.e., reward] of glory" (Rawlinson 1956: 1). Though in the past Greek poets such as Homer had composed epic poems about individual "historical" events, Herodotus's idea of producing a connected narrative of the Greek-Persian conflicts in prose was new to Greece. He thus was inventing the Classical genre of "history," which is why Cicero called him its "father." However, before recounting the wars themselves, Herodotus decided to discuss the origins of the conflict, which included describing the

creation of the Persian Empire and the history of some of its most important areas as well as the background of the Greeks and some of their leading city-states. This introductory material occupies more than half of his work, and in it he displays the influence of late sixth century authors called logographers (“writers of stories”) who wrote about the origins, myths, customs, and physical appearance of other cultures. In fact, Herodotus may have borrowed directly from some of these works.

Because of his inclusion of legends and folktales, some modern historians have agreed with Plutarch and Lucian that he is the “Father of Lies” as much as or more than the “Father of History” (Burn 1972: 10). It is true that he sometimes too easily accepted the stories told to him by his informants. However, Herodotus conceived of his role primarily as a collector of traditions. He remarks (VII. 152) that his task “is to write what has been said, but I do not have to believe it” (Grant 1989: 79). Even more disturbing than his use of legends, however, are claims that even when Herodotus mentions specific sources, he is lying—that he invented the narratives supposedly based on cited sources (Fehling 1990). His accounts of Near Eastern history are a case in point. Some details in Herodotus’s account, for example, the names of the kings of Phrygia, Lydia, and even Cyrus’s general who marched into Babylon (Gobryas), have been corroborated by cuneiform sources. On the other hand, his description of Babylonia’s history, the city of Babylon, and Babylonian customs is in direct confrontation with archaeological and historical evidence from Babylon itself. The description of Semiramis and Nitocris as queens and builders of Babylon is a garbled version of earlier Assyrian history. Herodotus also reports that girls in Babylon were forced to prostitute themselves at the temple of Ninlil before they were allowed to marry. There is no indication of such a custom in any cuneiform source, and this custom would seem to contradict the evidence of many marriage contracts. Whether Herodotus actually visited Babylon as he claims is thus a matter of lively debate (MacGinnis 1986; Rollinger 1993).

Actually, most of Herodotus’s work seems to be based on oral tradition rather than inscriptions or written sources, and in those cases there is no way to be certain which narratives are genuine and which Herodotus created. How, for instance, does Herodotus include direct quotations where it is clear that he would not have had access to that information (for example, private meetings in the Persian royal court)? We must remember that the ancient Greeks were an oral society (as were almost all ancient societies). Few people could read or write and the most common source of information was speech or oral tradition. Thus, like a dramatist, Herodotus puts words in the mouths of his characters to reveal their thoughts, feelings, or intentions. This was a convention used by almost all ancient historians (including the authors of the

prose sections of the Bible) that their audiences generally accepted for what it was—an interesting way to provide speculative interpretation. Like Greek epic poetry and drama where characters spoke directly, the *Histories* was meant to be read aloud before an audience.

Herodotus's work also has an obvious ideological bent. The narrative emphasizes fate and *hubris* ("overweening pride") with its accompanying divine retribution. According to Herodotus, individuals like Darius I and Xerxes I who become powerful and arrogant anger the gods who must then punish or destroy them. Herodotus also sometimes has the gods intervene directly in human affairs. For example, he seems to accept the story supposedly told by a participant in the battle of Marathon that a bearded divine warrior fought alongside the Athenians that day (*Histories*, VI. 117; Rawlinson 1956: 346). Perhaps, though, we are expecting too much of Herodotus. Like most of his contemporaries, Herodotus believed in divine control of history. What we should emphasize more are the times Herodotus provides rational explanations for events, finding causes in human character, emotions, ambitions, ignorance, or intelligence and the times he questions or omits explanations of divine causation.⁷

Herodotus created a whole new field, "universal history," that considered all aspects of the chosen subject. So, he was not just the "Father of History." He was also the father of ethnography and ethnology, the father of comparative anthropology, and probably of several other fields of study as well. Moreover, he was an excellent writer. Even his detractors admired his elegant use of the Ionic dialect and the grace of his style. As Michael Grant has remarked (1989: 80), he "converted Greek prose into a fine art." For all of these reasons, we must use his work with caution. But since Herodotus is our only source of information for large amounts of material, use it we must. Despite the shortcomings of the *Histories* as a historical source, we would be very much poorer without it.

Persian Culture

Persian Society

As in most Near Eastern cultures, at the head of Persian society was a king whose position was hereditary. Like most rulers of earlier Mesopotamian kingdoms, the Persian king was not considered divine—he was the chosen

viceroy of the god Ahura Mazda, creator of the world. Thus, it was believed that all people throughout the earth owed the king obedience and tribute. Once again, it must be noted that all of our knowledge of Persian court custom comes from Herodotus and other Greek authors and not native sources. To stress the fact that the king's authority was sanctioned by divine power, the Persians utilized royal costumes and court ritual even more elaborate than those of earlier empires. Over a striped tunic, crimson trousers, and boots, the king wore a full-sleeved long purple robe embroidered with designs in gold. He was also distinguished by his high, flat-topped, fluted felt cap (and on special occasions, a gold tiara), golden scepter, and the mass of golden jewelry at his ears, neck, and wrists. Servants whose duties took them near the king had to be muffled so their breath would not touch him, and any person who approached him had to prostrate himself on the ground. Higher-ranked officials did not have to bow, but owed him obeisance in the form of *proskynesis*, the blowing of a kiss to the master. He sat on a throne beneath a purple canopy supported by four columns, and in the palace he walked on purple carpets, which no other feet were allowed to touch.

In theory, the king's power was absolute, but in practice, like Assyrian kings, he was expected to confer with important members of the upper class and officials and behave in traditional ways. For example, though the king's word was law, the ruler usually consulted royal judges ("law-bearers") who informed him about previous laws and traditions. The king usually adhered to such laws and customs, but when he wished to deviate from them, it is clear that the royal judges could not (and would not) stand in his way. Herodotus says (*Histories*, III. 31) that when Cambyses wanted to marry his sister, the royal judges informed the king that they could not find a law permitting such a union (which violated custom). On the other hand, they pointed out, Persian law clearly stated that the king could do as he pleased. So, Cambyses went ahead with the marriage.

The succession to the throne was hereditary, but the oldest son did not automatically become crown prince. Like Assyrian kings, a Persian ruler could designate a younger son as his successor, as Darius I did when he chose Xerxes as crown prince. Xerxes was not Darius's eldest son, but he was the son of Cyrus's daughter Atossa and the first prince born after Darius became king. Being born "in the purple" (after the king has assumed his throne), may have been a prerequisite for choosing the crown prince (Brosius 2006: 32). Most of Darius's successors do not seem to have followed his example of having several wives, though they did have a multitude of concubines. The belief that Ahura Mazda could choose a prince other than the firstborn to become king tended to foster harem intrigues and often civil wars over the succession, just as a similar belief had done in Assyria.

Magi, members of a special priestly tribe or class among the Medes, schooled Persian princes in the company of boys from prominent upper-class families. The Persians used Elamite, Akkadian, and Old Persian for their inscriptions and Aramaic for commerce and correspondence, but we do not know how much of a Persian education was devoted to reading and writing. Presumably, the royal family and members of the aristocracy were at least functionally literate. Upper-class boys, in addition to learning military skills that were common to all Persian males (especially riding and archery), learned court etiquette and royal law while being steeped in the traditions and heroic legends of their ancestors. The Magi also emphasized loyalty to the king and taught their students the precepts and practices of the court religion (probably Mazdaism, an early form of the religion promulgated by Zarathustra)—especially the necessity of telling the Truth and opposing the Lie (see “Debating the Evidence: Were the Achaemenid Persians Zoroastrians?”). This education prepared the boys for their future roles as kings, satraps, or other high officials.

From the time of Darius I on, Persian kings married only women from the families of the six members of the upper class who had made Darius king. Foreign women could be concubines, but could not be married to the king or produce the crown prince.⁸ Persian queens were often dynamic and forceful individuals who were wealthy and powerful in their own right. They had unhindered access to their husbands and had the right to dine at his table and possibly even join in royal hunts (Brosius 2006: 41, 45). Queens controlled large estates in Persia, Egypt, Syria, and other lands that were administered by their own officials and which they visited on occasion. This freedom of movement and economic independence casts doubts on Greek reports of the seclusion of palace women in a closely guarded harem (Llewellyn-Jones 2013: 103–122).

The main official at court, second only to the king, was the *Hazarapatish* (“Commander of a Thousand,” called the Chiliarch by the Greeks), a kind of vizier chosen from the highest Persian nobility. He commanded the king’s bodyguard, supervised the pages, ushers, and others at court, personally delivered messages to the king, and controlled the royal audiences. Other members of the nobility with titles such as “King’s Spear Carrier” and “King’s Bow Carrier” also held high positions at court. In addition to the nobility, eunuch chamberlains and cupbearers also became very influential at court from the time of Artaxerxes I on. Only the king’s closest advisors could join him at the table. (See Llewellyn-Jones 2013: 29–40 for an overview of people at the Achaemenid court.)

The king customarily rewarded the loyalty of his relatives and members of the upper class with tokens of his esteem, such as horse trappings, special robes, and jewelry. The highest honor, though, was to be allowed to marry one

of the king's daughters. Nobles could also be granted large estates in various parts of the empire. From the revenues of these estates, the holders had to pay money for the recruitment and equipment of soldiers for the royal armies. Originally, in Persia, landowners seem to have had to supply men for military service, but as the empire grew, they were allowed to substitute monetary payments. The payments ranged from the amount required for an archer to that necessary to provide and support a chariot, driver, and either two or four horses.

As is true for most ancient societies, we know very little about Persian commoners. Herodotus refers to tribes of nomads and tribes of farmers, but we do not know the source of his information or its accuracy. Two groups of tablets found at Persepolis, the Fortification and Treasury tablets, provide scholars with some information about lower-class workers in the Persepolis area, but these laborers were not all Persians. They came from all parts of the empire; some were free salaried laborers, others were bondsmen (serf-like individuals who were bound to the land) or dependent tenant farmers, and still others were prisoners of war. Here, as in most parts of the empire, these lower classes worked lands that were part of the vast estates of the usually absentee landowners (the king, members of his family, or upper-class Persians). Some of the tablets detail rations for workers, and interestingly, women sometimes headed a group of workers and received larger shares of the rations than the men. Thus, it seems that some women had higher rank and held positions of more importance than many of the men (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1995: Vol. 2, 1044–1045). New mothers were also given higher rations. We know something of fiscal and military obligations of those working the land from the Egibi and Murashu families' economic tablets from Babylonia that provide information on economy and society in southern Mesopotamia in the seventh, sixth, and fifth centuries BCE, respectively (see [Chapter 11](#)). Also, late fifth-century BCE Aramaic documents from Egypt (the Elephantine Papyri; see [Chapter 13](#)) allow glimpses of social conditions and the management of Persian domains in the Nile valley.

The Persian Army

Persian kings had the manpower of a vast empire behind them. Beginning with Cyrus, they successfully created a formidable fighting force that was able to incorporate contingents from their conquered territories. The core of the army consisted of 10,000 each of cavalry-men and "Immortals," a band of elite infantry whose name derived from the fact that whenever a member died, a

new member immediately took his place, keeping the number always constant. One thousand of the Immortals made up the royal bodyguard (see [Figure 12.3](#)). All members of these two select regiments were Persians and professional soldiers, sworn directly to the king.

Besides these elite units, the bulk of the army consisted of infantrymen and a cavalry. Persian infantrymen are usually depicted carrying both a bow and a spear (see [Figure 12.3](#)), and inscriptions indicate that they were skillful with both, as were cavalrymen. These skills were taught to Persian boys at childhood, and they could enter the army at the age of 20. Persian infantrymen wore soft felt caps, trousers, and long-sleeved, embroidered tunics, usually over a shirt of mail armor. Each had a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder and a dagger hanging at his right thigh, while he carried a skin-covered wicker shield, a spear, and a bow. Members of the cavalry dressed in a similar fashion, except that they frequently wore metal helmets instead of soft caps. A cavalryman also carried a dagger, spear, bow, shield, and quiver, but he also often had an iron club and two javelins. In the latter part of the Achaemenid Period, mail coverings also protected the bodies of cavalry horses. The cavalry was the most feared portion of the Persian military forces and was unmatched until the time of Alexander the Great. Each of the branches was divided into 50-man units, which were then combined into groups of 100, 1,000, and 10,000 men. As we have already seen, Greek reports of millions of men in Xerxes's army is likely a gross exaggeration. We can assume, however, a fighting force of over 100,000 men.

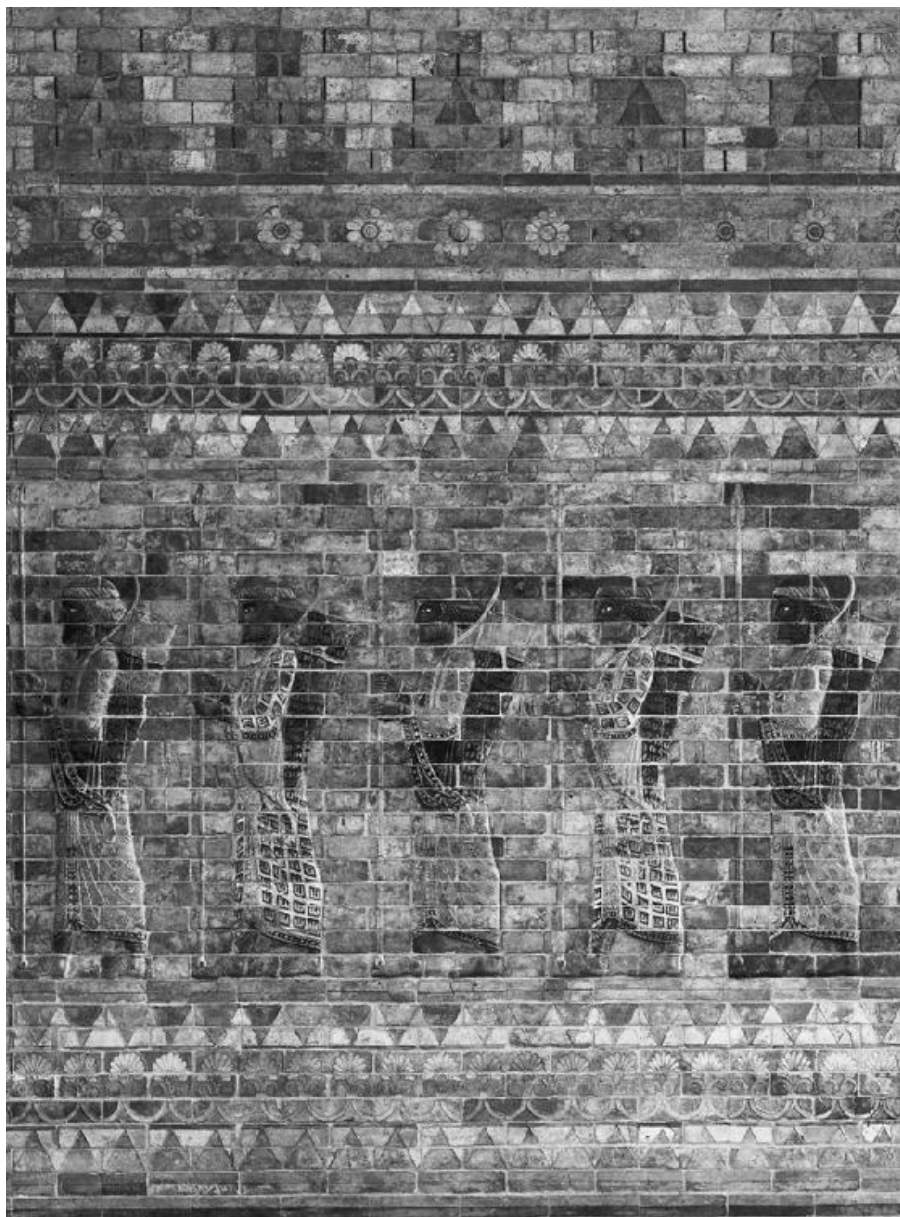


Figure 12.3 Persian Royal Guardsmen

A glazed-brick relief from the palace of Darius I at Susa.

© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

The Persian troops were supplemented with contingents from the subject peoples, dressed and armed according to their local custom. There were Scythian chariot corps, horsemen and bowmen, a Bactrian cavalry, Arab camel riders, and Greek hoplites, although these were usually hired as mercenaries.

Herodotus gives us a lengthy description of all of the foreign contingents of the army, their dress, and weaponry (Kuhrt 2007: 519–527, n. 25). As time went on, the Persians began to rely more and more on such levies rather than on Persian troops. Perhaps this reduced the quality and effectiveness of the armies of later Achaemenid rulers.

Debating the Evidence: Were the Achaemenid Persians Zoroastrians?

One of the most contentious issues in Achaemenid scholarship over the past fifty years concerns the religion of the early Persians. There are basically two schools of thought, one that argues that the kings of the Achaemenid court were devout Zoroastrians (Boyce 1982; 1992b), and the other that the Persians did not adopt Zoroastrianism until after the fall of the Persian Empire (Widengren 1965).

Zoroastrianism is the religion that is described by a collection of sacred writings known as the Avesta. It is named after a prophet/priest named Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek sources) who is the gods' protégé in the Avesta. It is generally believed that Zarathustra composed the Avesta (or at least part of it), but this is not explicitly stated in the texts. Later Greek tradition placed Zarathustra 258 years before Alexander's conquest of Persia in 330 BCE, therefore, Zarathustra was thought to have lived in the late seventh through early sixth century BCE. Today, however, it is generally agreed that the religion is much older and that Zarathustra probably lived between c. 1300 and 1000 BCE. Linguistic analysis has shown that the Avesta contains older and younger materials which date from the second millennium and early first millennium BCE, respectively (Skjaervø 2014: 175). The older texts include the *Gathas* (hymns) that many think were composed by Zarathustra (Boyce 1992b) and the *Yasna Haptanghatiti* (Sacrifice in Seven Sections). These texts likely were composed in the region around Central Asia. The younger texts, notably the *Yasna* (or morning ritual/sacrifice), hymns, and the rules of pollution, seem to have come from eastern Iran/Afghanistan. Old Avestan is close to the language of the *Rig-Veda* which also belongs to the second millennium BCE. Young Avestan is linguistically closest to Old Persian and probably dates to the early first millennium BCE. However, none of the Avesta was written down until after 500 CE and perhaps as late as 700 CE (Skjaervø 2013: 549).

Zoroastrianism, as laid out in the Avesta, understands the world as a continuous struggle between the forces of evil (led by a god called Angra Mainu ["Evil Spirit"] and his *daevas*) (these are understood as the old gods

who are malevolent spirits or demons) vs. the good god Ahura Mazda (“The Omniscient Lord”). Ahura Mazda is the creator of the world, the fount of all happiness, and the supreme deity (Boyce 1992a). (In later Zoroastrianism the names of these deities were contracted to Ahriman and Ormazd.) The two opposing gods are conceptualized as Order, Truth, Righteousness, Light (Avestan *asha*/ Persian *arta*) on the one hand and Chaos, the Lie, Wickedness, and Darkness (Avestan *drug* /Persian *drauga*) on the other. Supporting Ahura Mazda were the *Amesha Spentas* (“Life-giving Immortals”), deified versions of abstract concepts of good such as “wholeness” or “best purpose.” They were sometimes worshipped as gods in their own right, as we will see later on. Zarathustra taught that Ahura Mazda had created the world as a perfect place, but this perfection is under continuous assault by Angra Mainu and his followers. People have free will, and must decide which path to pursue; whether to be *ashavans*, “followers of Truth,” or *dregvants*, “followers of the Lie.” The Avesta also introduced the idea that the good will go to “best existence” after death, while the bad will go to “worst existence.” At the end of days, there will be a reckoning among all people separating the good from the bad. Finally, Ahura Mazda will prevail in restoring the world to the perfection it had when it was first created and death and *drauga* will be overcome.

Contrary to earlier assessments that characterized pure Zoroastrianism as basically monotheist, it is a dualistic or polytheistic religion wherein Ahura Mazda reigns supreme. One of the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism is that Ahura Mazda’s order has to be regularly reshaped with the help of sacrifices by humans. In the Avesta these are offerings of animals, libations in front of a fire, and a ritual involving the offering of a hallucinogenic drink called *haoma*. Fire in the Avesta is the messenger who goes between the worlds of thought and humans, bringing the offerings of the worshipper to the gods and the gifts of the gods to the worshipper. By the time of Zarathustra, the Old Iranian deities seem to have been demoted to the status of *daevas*, the malevolent henchmen of Angra Mainu. For protection against the *daevas* Zoroastrians practiced regulations regarding ritual impurity. For instance, Zoroastrians were adjured to expose the corpses of their dead rather than cremate or bury them, which could pollute earth and fire.

Late Greek authors believed that the early Persians were Zoroastrians, and some evidence supports such a claim. First, and most importantly, are the inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings. Darius and Xerxes both name Ahura Mazda as the preeminent god and mention the concepts of *arta* and *drauga*. Darius’s funerary inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam asserts, “A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king over many, one lord of many” (Kuhrt 1995: Vol. 2, 676). Darius I is the first to make

such claims, and it is possible that he introduced the worship of Ahura Mazda to the Achaemenid court. Xerxes certainly was influenced by his father's beliefs. He too exclaimed,

Among these countries there was a place where previously *daevas* had been worshipped. Afterwards, by the favor of Ahura Mazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of *daevas*, and I made a proclamation: "The *daevas* had been worshipped." Where previously the *daevas* had been worshipped, there I worshipped Ahura Mazda in accordance with *arta* reverently.

(Brosius 2006: 69 with slight modifications by Susan Helft)

Both Darius's and Xerxes's inscriptions can be read as testaments to their devotion to Ahura Mazda and his maxims of order and righteousness (Kuhrt 1995: 680–682; Skjaervø 2005, 2014: 178).

The arguments against viewing the Achaemenids as Zoroastrian must also be considered. For one thing, there is no mention of Zarathustra or even Angra Mainu in any Persian text. This could be explained away as resulting from the different text genres, inscriptions on the one hand and ritual texts on the other. Furthermore, Persian documents attest to the worship of many Iranian and other gods not mentioned in Zarathustra's *Gathas*. Certainly, the religious context of the court does not adhere to a single doctrine (Allen 2005: 125). However, we should probably discard the notion that there was a normative Zoroastrianism reflected in the *Gathas* to which the Persians had to adhere, and so, this becomes less of a problem (de Jong 2010). Harder to dismiss is the fact that Achaemenid kings buried their dead kings in tombs, rather than exposing them as is prescribed in the Avesta. This too, may not hold much weight, for later Sassanian kings, who were certainly Zoroastrians, also buried their dead (de Jong 2010: 535). Indeed, the fact that they were buried in stone houses or rock-cut tombs may even suggest that they were consciously trying to avoid burial in the earth, which the Zoroastrians considered a form of pollution (Boyce 1982: 110–112; Skjaervø 2013: 561).

In fact, in general we know very little about religion in the Achaemenid Period. The Greeks said that the Persians had no temples, instead worshipping at outdoor platforms, and indeed to date no Persian building has been identified as a temple. Two mysterious towers, one at Pasargadae and the other at Persepolis, may have had a religious function, but this is far from certain. It is clear from both royal inscriptions and tablets that in addition to Ahura Mazda, the Persian kings worshipped Elamite gods and, on occasion, the Babylonian gods Marduk and Adad, as well as Amun-Re in Egypt when it was politically expedient. Artaxerxes II introduced two other gods known from the Avesta (although not in the *Gathas*): Mithra (a sun god) and Anahita (water and fertility goddess). Greek sources also report that the Persians worshipped with fire, and this is backed up by archaeological finds of fire altars and their

representations in Achaemenid art. Inscriptions mention animal sacrifices, including bulls and horses, and libations (Brosius 2006: 63). Herodotus even mentions a Persian practice of exposing the dead and their aversion of polluting rivers and streams, but no hint of these practices can be found in the Persian sources.

The recent publication of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets has also enriched our knowledge of early Persian religion. Among the accounts are several lists of rations given to deities who are only known in the Avesta (Skjaervø 2013: 533). Personal names in the Fortification tablets (and also among the Aramaic letters at Elephantine) include some that are also based on Avestan concepts and gods (Skjaervø 2014: 179). Moreover, Vishtaspa, Darius I's father, has a good Zoroastrian name. The Fortification tablets also record the celebration of a large public ceremony called the *lan* (ritual), which despite its Elamite name also has parallels with Zoroastrian rituals (Skjaervø 2013: 560). Finally, the inscribed Aramaic bowls found with the Persepolis Fortification Tablets leave no doubt that the Achaemenid court practiced the *haoma* ritual, a Zoroastrian custom. One might also consider the Aramaic ostraca from Bactria that use Zoroastrian month names and prove that the Zoroastrian calendar was already in use in Achaemenid times (de Jong 2010: 541).

Despite some discrepancies, the correspondences between the religious practices of the Achaemenid court and those in the Avesta are hard to dismiss. At the very least both are variations of Mazdaism (the worship of Ahura Mazda). For some scholars this is Zoroastrianism, but for others this is an earlier Iranian religion that Zarathustra reformed and replaced. Most recently, some scholars see Achaemenid Mazdaism as a type of proto-Zoroastrianism (Brosius 2006: 33) which likely had a strong hand in the development of the "Classical" Zoroastrian religion of post-Achaemenid times (de Jong 2010: 542).

Persian Art and Architecture

It is often assumed that before the time of Cyrus, the Persians had few native architectural or artistic traditions of their own. In fact, the Persians were already assimilated with the Elamites and other peoples of Iran and were part and parcel of these Iranian cultures. Nevertheless, beginning with Cyrus the rulers of the Persian Empire created a new imperial style which is justifiably called Persian art. Just as the Persian Empire embraced the entire Near East, Persian architecture and art were also international, utilizing artisans and blending styles from all parts of the empire.

It has already been mentioned that Persian royal architecture beginning with Cyrus exhibited Median, Elamite, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Lydian, and Greek elements. Darius's palace at Susa, for example, combined a series of courtyards like those in Nebuchadnezzar's palace at Babylon with columned porticos and halls like those of Pasargadae. The wide, columned entrances and porticos that the Persians utilized in their palaces were based on Median or Urartian structures, but the multicolumned audience hall, called an *apadana*, with its soaring, open interior supported by widely spaced columns, seems to be a largely Persian innovation. Some scholars think large tents used in earlier times may have inspired this design, others that it was inspired by Egyptian hypostyle halls. The most beautiful of these audience halls was constructed by Darius I (with additions by Xerxes I) on a 46-foot-high terrace at Persepolis (see [Figure 12.4](#), center left). It had wide, columned porticos on three sides, two of which could be approached by monumental double staircases decorated with bas-reliefs of the Immortals, lions attacking bulls, and processions of tribute bearers ([Figure 12.5](#)). Each

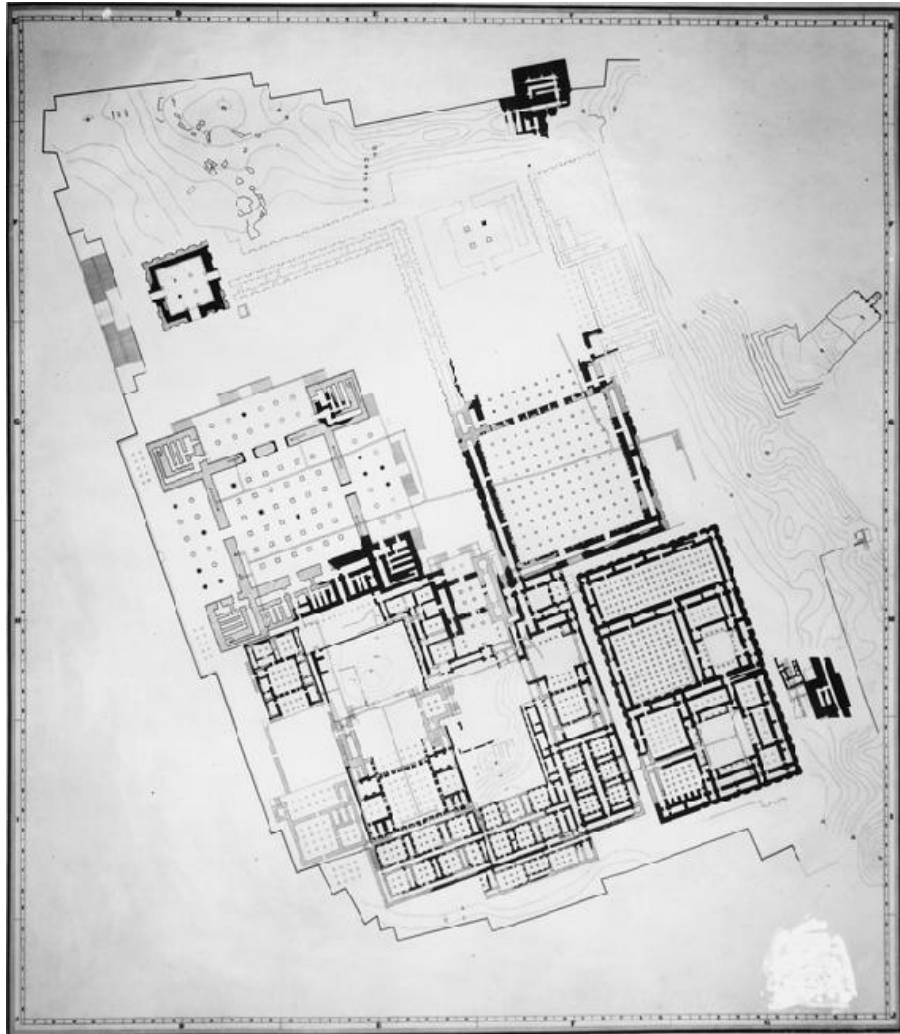


Figure 12.4 Plan of Persepolis

© Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago



Figure 12.5 The Apadana (Audience Hall) at Persepolis, Images of the “Harmonious Empire”

© Prisma by Dukas Presseagentur GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo.

portico had twelve slender, sixty-five-foot-high columns on Egyptian-like bases that were fluted in Ionian Greek style. The capitals of the east and west porticos were in the shape of the joined foreparts of two bulls, while those of the north portico and interior had double-bull or double-lion figures surmounting elongated double-Ionic capitals. These, in turn, stood atop Egyptian-like flower-capitals (see similar ones in the Gate of All Nations, [Figure 12.6](#)). The columns supported heavy cedar beams from Phoenicia, which in turn supported smaller roof timbers. Probably the roof beams, decorative elements of the columns, and bas-relief carvings on the staircases were all originally painted in bright colors.



Figure 12.6 Doorway of the Gate of All Nations

Two 18-foot-high human-headed limestone bulls flank this official entrance to Persepolis.
Photo by W. Buss. © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY.

Other buildings at Persepolis also featured columned interiors and entrances flanked by large carved bulls in the tradition of Assyrian palaces (see [Figure 12.6](#)). Darius I erected or at least planned most of these structures, but Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I also added “palaces,” halls, and other features (see [Figure 12.5](#)). These grand structures probably were used only for formal receptions and ceremonial purposes rather than as living quarters. There are no kitchens

with ovens or food preparation areas, no sources of running water, and no provisions for sanitation. Undoubtedly, the real palace where the king, harem, and entourage dwelled while at Persepolis was on the plain in front of the monumental terrace. At that location, archaeologists have found the remains of grand buildings and a garden with an ornamental lake. Other dwellings may have been scattered across the plain as well, but this area has not been extensively excavated.



Figure 12.7 Gold Bracelet with Griffin Terminals

© Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

Persian sculpture, metalwork, and other arts exhibit the same eclectic blending of various motifs, styles, and techniques seen in their architecture. They created bas-relief images not only in stone, but also with molded glazed bricks (see [Figure 12.3](#)), a Babylonian technique. Bas-relief carvings and sculpture in the round are generally in Mesopotamian style, but they also

contain a few Greek features (such as the drapery folds in robes). Persian bas-reliefs, however, are much more static than Assyrian ones. Instead of battles or hunting scenes, the Persians glorify the king by depicting processions of soldiers (see [Figure 12.3](#)) and tribute bearers, and only rarely the king in triumph over his enemies (see [Figure 12.1](#)), or worshipping Ahura Mazda before a fire altar. Particularly at Persepolis, the sculptured bas-reliefs depict the vastness and diversity of the Persian Empire. The repetitive forms of foreigners and attendants carries the message of a peaceful and ordered empire emanating from the king, whose “Persianness” is emphasized (Root 1979; Kuhrt 2007: 470). Persian luxury metalwork, mostly gold and silver vessels, jewelry, and ornaments through which the Persians displayed their wealth, also reflected the eclectic style. These objects were often decorated with winged ibexes, winged lions with horns, griffins (see [Figure 12.7](#)), and other fantastic creatures in addition to normal animals such as lions, ibexes, or wild rams. These animal figures are a blend of traditional Iranian, Scythian, Mesopotamian, and Greek styles and motifs. The artistic genius of the Persians was in the way that they merged these disparate elements into beautiful works of art. Some of these items, such as drinking vessels and animal-headed bracelets, were copied all over the empire and even influenced local Greek production, as elites there chose to emulate Persian habits.

The Latter Part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire

The Continuation of Royal Power (424–330 BCE)

When Artaxerxes I died in 424 BCE, there was a dynastic squabble for his seat. Ochus, a son of Artaxerxes by a concubine, claimed the throne and took the name Darius II (423 to 405/404 BCE), but Xerxes (probably the designated successor) was recognized as king (as Xerxes II, 424 BCE) by Greek sources. He was murdered after ruling for little more than a month. But one of his half-brothers, Sogdianus (another son of a concubine), also asserted his right to the throne. Civil war raged for a year before Sogdianus was killed and Darius II became undisputed ruler. Except for the events in the Aegean we have little information on Darius II's reign. At this time the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta was raging in Greece (431–404 BCE), and Persia took advantage of the situation to reassert its control over Ionia, which had come under Athenian domination. Athenian imperialism was clearly a threat to Persian interests, so when Athens lost a fleet attempting to conquer Syracuse (413 BCE), Darius II began sending funds to Sparta so it could build a fleet and challenge Athens' control of the seas. This policy hastened Athens' ultimate defeat, which came soon after Darius died (see Kagan 2003).

Darius's eldest son and crown prince, Arsaces, succeeded him and took the throne name Artaxerxes II (404–359 BCE), but the new king was plunged into crises almost immediately. Egypt had revolted and established its independence under Pharaoh Amyrteus (404–399 BCE), founder of Dynasty 28. Before Artaxerxes could adequately respond to the Egyptian rebellion, his brother Cyrus, the satrap of Lydia, attempted to make himself king. In 401 BCE, Cyrus marched on Babylon with an army that included some 10,000 Greek mercenaries. Artaxerxes met his brother in battle at Cunaxa, north of Babylon, and though the Greeks acquitted themselves well, Cyrus was killed in the battle. Their cause lost, the Greek mercenaries marched north along the Tigris River and fought their way through western Armenia to the Black Sea whence they returned to Greek lands. Xenophon, one of the leaders of the Greek mercenaries, wrote *Anabasis* or *March Up Country*, an account of the Greeks' experiences that later helped convince Alexander of Macedon that Persia was ripe for conquest.

Despite the inauspicious beginning of his reign, Artaxerxes achieved some success after his brother's death. Though he was not able to reconquer Egypt, he managed to keep it from spreading its rule over the Levant. Possibly as part of his policy to pacify Syria-Palestine and limit Egyptian influence there, he sent Ezra to Jerusalem in 398 BCE (assuming that the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7:7 is Artaxerxes II and not Artaxerxes I; see [Chapter 13](#)). Furthermore, continuing conflict in Greece between Sparta, on the one hand, and Thebes, Athens, and other cities on the other, allowed Artaxerxes to impose a settlement called the King's Peace in 387/386 BCE. Under the terms of this agreement, the Greek city-states were forbidden to form large alliances (or "Leagues") and had to recognize Persian control over the Greek cities in Asia Minor. Thus, in many ways, the ultimate winner of the Peloponnesian War was not Sparta, but Persia.

Artaxerxes II's power must have weakened towards the end of his 46-year reign, for several satraps in Anatolia tried to seize more power, and once again the king's succession was the source of palace intrigue. Prior to his death, he had to execute his oldest son and crown prince, Darius, for conspiring to seize the throne. His next oldest son was tricked into committing suicide. So, when Artaxerxes died in 359 BCE, he was succeeded by his ruthless son Ochus who, according to the Greek writer Plutarch, had skillfully engineered the deaths of his older brothers. Ochus took the name Artaxerxes III (359–338 BCE) and assured his position by murdering all of his relatives who might claim the throne—not a minor undertaking, as Artaxerxes II supposedly fathered 115 sons. Artaxerxes III was the last of the strong Achaemenid kings, crushing revolts in Syria and Phoenicia c. 345 BCE and reconquering Egypt in 343 BCE. In 338 BCE, as Philip II of Macedon was establishing his control over Greece, Artaxerxes and all of his sons except one were poisoned by Bagoas, the chief eunuch. The surviving son, Arses, was made puppet king with the name Artaxerxes IV (338–336 BCE), but Bagoas killed him, too, when he tried to establish his independence. Bagoas then made a distant relative of the royal family king as Darius III (336–330 BCE), but once in power, Darius had Bagoas eliminated.

Conquest by Alexander the Great

While the Persian monarchy was being weakened by intrigues and constant assassinations, a new power had arisen across the Aegean Sea. Philip II (359–336 BCE) had reorganized the Macedonian army, modifying the equipment and fighting style of the infantry phalanx, and with this new force he greatly

extended Macedonian dominion. His expansion culminated with control over most of Greece in 338 BCE, when he and his eighteen-year-old son Alexander defeated an army of Thebans and Athenians at Chaeronea. Philip then turned his attention to “liberating” the Greek cities of Ionia, but before he could undertake his planned invasion of Asia Minor, a disgruntled Macedonian nobleman assassinated him in 336 BCE. Alexander III (336–323 BCE) thus became king in the same year as Darius III, the man he would challenge for control of the Near East.⁹

After consolidating his power within Macedon and Greece, in 334 BCE, Alexander led his well-trained army and superb cavalry into Asia Minor. He was almost killed in his initial battle with Darius’s forces at the Granicus River, but he survived to inflict a stinging defeat on the Persians, killing large numbers of them. Alexander gained control of Anatolia (including the ports and their Phoenician fleets) and won the support of his new subjects. In Caria in southwest Asia Minor, he restored power to Ada, a queen who had been deposed by her brother, and had himself adopted as her son. This action legitimized his claim to Caria and won him unstinting support from his new “mother.” As he advanced, he continued this policy of placing local rulers in charge of satrapies (whose organization he maintained) while keeping military forces under Macedonian command.

Darius III and his army (which included many Greek mercenaries) met the Macedonian forces in 333 BCE at Issus, a relatively narrow spot along the north Syrian coast. Alexander led the Companions, his heavy cavalry that had been stationed on the right flank, in an angled charge against the Persian center, breaking through almost to the position of Darius himself. Darius fled from this onslaught, disheartening many of the Persian soldiers who also turned and ran, turning the battle into a rout. Soon afterward, Alexander captured the Persian baggage train, which not only had the treasure Darius had carried with him but also the women of the court, including Darius’s wife, mother, and children. Alexander treated them courteously, continuing to lay a foundation for Persian acceptance of him as rightful ruler.

While Darius fled eastward to rebuild his army, Alexander seized most of the Phoenician ports. Tyre and then Gaza, which would not surrender, were practically annihilated. Afterwards, Alexander was welcomed as Pharaoh by the people of Egypt. Then in 331 BCE, he advanced into Assyria to confront Darius again at Gaugamela, not far from the ruins of Nineveh. Darius had arrayed his forces on a level plain, which would allow him to make the best use of his cavalry and the 200 scythed chariots he had gathered. During the battle, however, the chariots proved worthless against the Macedonian infantry that allowed them to charge through gaps in the formation that closed up again after their passage. Once in the rear, the chariots were set upon by light

infantry whose soldiers killed the horses with long spears. Meanwhile, the Macedonian cavalry, again led by Alexander, made straight for the position of Darius, who once more fled from battle, initiating another rout. Afterward, Alexander systematically took possession of the Persian capitals—Babylon, Susa, Pasargadae, Persepolis, and Ecbatana—whose treasuries contained 180,000 talents (more than 7,400 tons) of gold. In the spring of 330 BCE, he allowed his army to loot Persepolis, the symbol of Persian power and grandeur. Then, possibly while drunk, he burned it to the ground, supposedly in revenge for Persian devastation in Greece. Some scholars think, though, that the destruction was a calculated action to indicate the end of Achaemenid rule. Soon afterward, Darius, still fleeing, was murdered by one of his own satraps. When Alexander found the body he had it returned to Persepolis and given a royal burial. Then, with the support of Darius's family, Alexander proclaimed himself the legitimate ruler of Persia and avenger of Darius. He maintained the empire's organization into satrapies and its tributary system while trying to integrate members of the Iranian upper class into his administration. However, the empire he created was destined to be dominated by Macedonians. The Achaemenid Persian Empire died in 330 BCE with its last Persian king.

Epilogue: The Near East after the Achaemenid Empire

Alexander's conquest of Persia marks the end of an era, but there was much continuity between the period of Macedonian rule and what had gone before. As mentioned earlier, Alexander maintained many aspects of the Persian administrative system and tried to integrate the Macedonian and Iranian ruling classes. He himself married Roxane, daughter of an eastern Iranian chieftain, as well as two daughters of Darius III, and he rewarded those Macedonians who married Persian women. However, Alexander's acceptance of some Persian customs (especially prostration before him), his appointment of Iranians to administrative positions, and his increasingly autocratic manner angered many of his Macedonians. His conquests ended just across the Indus River when his army mutinied and refused to go any further. He returned to Babylon where he died of fever (or was poisoned)¹⁰ in 323 BCE at only thirty-two years of age.

Following Alexander's death, his generals vied for control of the empire, and eventually full-scale warfare broke out between them. Three major kingdoms, named after the generals who created them, emerged in the eastern

Mediterranean region: the Ptolemaic Kingdom (essentially Egypt), the Seleucid Kingdom (initially most of the old Persian empire), and the Antigonid Kingdom (essentially Macedonia). These kingdoms or empires often were at war with one another until one by one they were conquered by the growing power of Rome. The Roman general Octavian (later given the title Augustus) annexed the last of them (Egypt) in 30 BCE after the death of the last Ptolemaic ruler, the famous Cleopatra VII. Because the rulers of these eastern Mediterranean kingdoms were Macedonians who spoke Greek and fostered the spread of Greek settlements and culture into the Near East, the three centuries following Alexander's death are known as the Hellenistic Age. Despite the use of Greek by the rulers and the upper classes of the Near Eastern kingdoms, however, most of the old languages and customs survived. In the cities, Greek culture became a thin veneer applied on top of the native Near Eastern civilizations; in the rural areas Greek influences were usually resisted and almost totally absent. In some regions, the Macedonian rulers eventually were overthrown and replaced by native dynasties, such as the Parthians and then the Sassanians in Iran and Mesopotamia and the Hasmoneans (or Maccabees) in Judah. This period of intense contact and sometimes conflict between Greek civilization and the ancient Near Eastern cultures, however, resulted in the spread of many elements of Near Eastern civilization to other parts of the world. The Hellenistic kingdoms, the Roman Empire, and, later, the Byzantine and Arab Empires became conduits through which many aspects of ancient Near Eastern civilization were passed on to later ages, and ultimately to us (see the Afterword).

Notes

1. The chronology for the Lydian kings used here and in Table 12.1 are those in Roux (1992: Chronological Chart VII). They are only very approximate. Compare them with the slightly different dates given in Cook (1983: 265) and Kuhrt (1995: Vol. 2, 568).
2. This person is not to be confused with Cyrus the Great, who ruled around a century later. Whether this individual could be Cyrus's grandfather, Cyrus I, is still a matter of debate (Potts 2005: 18).
3. As we shall see, Darius I's claims about his relationship to Cyrus the Great are very questionable, so it is unlikely that Cyrus and Cambyses were really descendants of Achaemenes. See, for example, the discussions in Kuhrt (1995: Vol. 2, 664–665), Briant (2002: 111, 138), and Waters (2003: 91). Potts (2005: 7–28) not only denies that Cyrus II and his royal ancestors were Achaemenids, but also that they were Persians! He sees them as “Anshanites” who were linguistically and culturally Elamite.
4. Achaemenid historical sources in translation can be found in Kuhrt (2007).

5. It has generally been assumed that a Babylonian chronicle's mention of a campaign by Cyrus II in 547/546 BCE refers to his march against Lydia. However, the destination of the attack is not preserved, so dating the end of Lydia to 547 or 546 BCE is only hypothetical, though Cyrus probably did conquer it sometime in the mid-540s BCE. See Cargill (1977) and Rollinger (2008).
6. The Greek word *historia* did not originally mean "history." It meant "establishing [the truth]" and thus "investigation" or "research." However, because of Herodotus's *Histories* and later those of Thucydides, the word came to mean research into the past or accounts of the past resulting from such research. Eventually, of course, it also came to mean the past itself.
7. For example, at the beginning of his work Herodotus relates stories of Phoenicians seizing Greek women and Greeks retaliating in kind, which led Alexander (Paris) the Trojan to resolve to procure a wife from the Greeks by violence. In this brief reference to the cause of the Trojan War, Herodotus does not recount the traditional Greek claim that the ultimate cause of the war was Paris's choice of Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess. This choice supposedly led Aphrodite to make the Spartan queen Helen fall in love with Paris and at the same time it turned Hera and Athena, the rejected goddesses, strongly against Troy. Herodotus opts for human, rather than divine causation here.
8. Only in one instance, Darius II, did the son of a concubine succeed to the throne.
9. There is an enormous bibliography on the life of Alexander the Great. See especially Hammond (1980); Fox (1986); Green (1991); Stoneman (2004); and Martin and Blackwood (2012).
10. Paul Doherty (2004) argues that Alexander was poisoned (probably by arsenic) by his friend and general, Ptolemy, who afterwards became Ptolemy I, ruler of Egypt.

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Ancient Israel and Judah

The ancient states of Israel and Judah were among the weakest and least prosperous nations in the Near East. Throughout their history these two states were caught between the conflicts of the more powerful states of Mesopotamia and Egypt. However, because their religion and scriptures became basic components of Western civilization, the history of these two fraternal states generally has merited greater attention than would be expected from their size, political influence, or military power.

Early Israel

Historical-Critical Analysis of the Bible

Israel is one of the few ancient lands to preserve an account of its origins, and most Westerners have at least a nodding acquaintance with the Bible's stories of patriarchal wanderings, Exodus from Egypt, conquest of Canaan, and creation of a monarchy. At one time Jews and Christians almost universally accepted these biblical accounts as totally factual, but over the past two and a half centuries, the Bible's scientific and historical accuracy has been hotly debated *within* various faith communities as well as by non-believers.

Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians believe that biblical accounts are correct in every detail and that in some cases eyewitnesses who participated in the events they narrated wrote them. Moses supposedly wrote the Pentateuch (or *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible), Joshua the book that bears his name, Samuel the books that bear his name, David most of the Psalms, and so forth. Moreover, many in these groups of Jews and Christians believe that God inspired not just the ideas in the Bible, but also the wording of the text (though they admit that some minor mistakes could have been made when the material was copied by later scribes). Thus, for them, the

ultimate author of the accounts is God himself.

However, careful analysis of the biblical material has revealed many inconsistencies, contradictions, duplications, and differences in style and vocabulary, sometimes within a single biblical book. Using the methods of source and literary analysis developed for the study of other ancient texts and literature, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century CE biblical scholars delineated several “documents” or written works that eventually had been compiled into the Pentateuch (*Torah*) and other “historical” prose books of the Bible.¹ Today, mainstream Western scholars (including those in many branches of Christianity and Judaism) assert that these narratives were written long after the times they describe and contain some inaccuracies and legendary material.

These scholars also recognize that writers of early biblical “history,” like the authors of other ancient Near Eastern annals and inscriptions, did not approach their subject with the objectivity and detachment attempted by modern historians. Ultimately, the biblical “historians,” at least those responsible for the final versions in the Bible, had political and religious motivations. They aimed to bolster the claims of Judah and its monarchy as the legitimate Israelite kingdom, while also leading the Israelites to more faithful devotion to God by supporting Judean religious reforms. To create their works, these biblical authors used a variety of materials such as ancient myths, legends, and oral traditions, as well as written sources, including royal annals and collections of early poetic songs (for example, the Book of Jashar quoted by the author of the biblical books of Joshua and Judges).

Until the latter part of the twentieth century CE, most biblical scholars who used the historical-critical method for analyzing biblical texts dated the earliest of the prose biblical narratives or documents to the time of Solomon or just afterward. The two early compositions they identified were a Pentateuchal source called *J* (for the “Yahwist” or “Jahwist” work) and another composition called “The Court History of David” or “The Succession Narrative” (2 Samuel 9 through 1 Kings 2).² So through the 1960s, most biblical scholars, historians, and archaeologists thought that the stories concerning early Israel were based on authentic oral traditions that were written down relatively early, and thus, were essentially (though not totally) historical.

However, over the past two generations, the work of several biblical scholars and archaeologists has undermined this consensus. Today, the early history of the Israelites is the most fiercely debated period in Israelite history. Some scholars now claim that *J*, the “Court History,” and the other biblical prose narratives were not written until after the Babylonian Exile, during the Persian and Hellenistic Periods, and present an idealized, largely fictional account of Israel’s early history (e.g., Rendtorff 1990; Van Seters 1975, 1983, 1992, 1994). At

present, there is much skepticism about whether we can know anything about Israel's history before the time of the Judges (twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE) or the beginning of the monarchy (tenth century BCE), and some think we know nothing before the ninth century BCE. Many scholars still believe that the patriarchal traditions may have been based on a dim memory that some of Israel's ancestors participated in Amorite movements of the late third and early second millennia BCE (e.g., Coogan 2013: 89–92). However, the confidence of the previous generation that we could clearly place the biblical patriarchs within their Near Eastern context and provide firm dates for their era has dissipated. While the stories possibly contain some ancient elements passed down by oral tradition, their final version (including the family relationships of the various figures) probably reflects the interests and ideology of Judah from the ninth through the seventh centuries BCE or later (see, e.g., Thompson 1974; Rogerson 1999; Finkelstein and Silberman 2001; McCarter 2011a; Coogan 2013: 85–92).

Debating the Evidence: Israel's Exodus and Settlement in Canaan

The most widely contested biblical tradition is the Israelite account of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the land of Israel. Today, most would agree that the Israelites never experienced bondage and escape from Egypt the way it is described in the Pentateuch. On the one hand, the narrative of how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and to the borders of Canaan contains many discrepancies and elements of folklore.³ It includes the literary trope of the deserted infant destined for greatness, miraculous events, and a highly exaggerated number of participants—the number of people involved was almost certainly very much smaller than the 600,000 adult males, of a total population of about 2 million, given in Numbers 1 and 26. In addition, none of the particulars of the Exodus story have been confirmed by archaeology. The Exodus most likely occurred sometime in the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–1150 BCE). However, there are no Egyptian records that mention the Israelites in Egypt or any kind of conflict with them, and archaeologists have turned up no artifacts from this era anywhere in Sinai except for Egyptian ones at the mines at Serabit el-Khadim and Timnah or the Egyptian way stations along the Mediterranean coastal road. There are also no signs of Late Bronze Age occupation at Kadesh Barnea, Arad, Heshbon, or Dibon (assuming we have identified them correctly), sites that play important parts in the Exodus and Numbers accounts (Stiebing 1989: 66–78).

Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the Exodus story contains a memory of actual events, albeit substantially reshaped by biblical authors. First of all, many consider it unlikely that any nation would invent a tradition that its founders had suffered shameful slavery in a foreign land. There probably was a real Moses, for his name is Egyptian. It derives from the Egyptian word for “born” or “child of,” as in Egyptian names such as Ahmose, Thutmose and Amenmose. It was also sometimes used alone to mean “young child,” applied to the infant form of the god Re. The Bible provides an inaccurate Hebrew folk etymology for Moses’s name (Exodus 2:10),⁴ suggesting that the later Israelites did not understand its origin and meaning. Thus, it is very unlikely that they fabricated it or the person who bears it. Other Egyptian names such as Phinehas, Hophni, and Merari also occur among the Levites, Moses’s tribe, further supporting the tradition of an Egyptian background for at least a portion of the Israelites.

Many scholars are convinced that references to the city of Raamses in the narratives about the oppression and Exodus date the Exodus to the thirteenth century BCE. This city (Egyptian Pi-Ramesses or Per-Ramesses, on the site of earlier Avaris) was named after and greatly enlarged by Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 BCE). Because of silting of the Nile branch on which it was located, it was abandoned around 1000 BCE. Probably its name could not have become imbedded in biblical narratives written after that date unless they were based on authentic traditions from Israel’s pre-monarchic period (Bietak 2015; 2016). A date in the thirteenth century BCE or earlier for the Exodus is also suggested by the fact that Ramesses II’s successor, Merneptah, claims to have destroyed a people called “Israel” c. 1208 BCE (see [Document 9.2](#) in [Chapter 9](#) and [Figure 13.1](#)). Because of problems with the archaeological evidence mentioned earlier and the ambiguity of Merneptah’s reference to Israel, a few scholars have proposed dating the Exodus even later, in the 1100s BCE. These problems plus the fact that 1 Kings 6:1 indicates that the Exodus occurred in the 1440s BCE, before Pi-Ramesses became the pharaoh’s primary residence, have led some scholars to argue that two or more groups ancestral to later Israel may have left Egypt at different times and traveled to Canaan by different routes. Still others submit that the Exodus traditions are based on the real Egyptian domination of and eventual withdrawal from Palestine in the Late Bronze Age (Killebrew 2005: 152; Na’aman 2011: 59–61).

In recent decades, support for the biblical tradition of an Israelite military acquisition of Canaan has also faded due to the fact that much of the archaeological evidence from Israel and Jordan is very difficult to reconcile with the biblical conquest narratives. Several cities that play an important role in the narratives, especially Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon, were not occupied during the fifteenth or thirteenth centuries BCE, the two most commonly supported

times for the Exodus. Some scholars have attempted to find alternative dates for the Exodus that would better fit the archaeological evidence, but their efforts have not met with success (Stiebing 1989: 79–148). Moreover, the pottery styles and other aspects of material culture of the presumed “Israelite” villages that appear in the Palestinian hills in the Iron Age I are closely related to those of the previous Late Bronze Age cultures of Canaan and Transjordan. So, many leading archaeologists and biblical scholars have abandoned the traditional views of

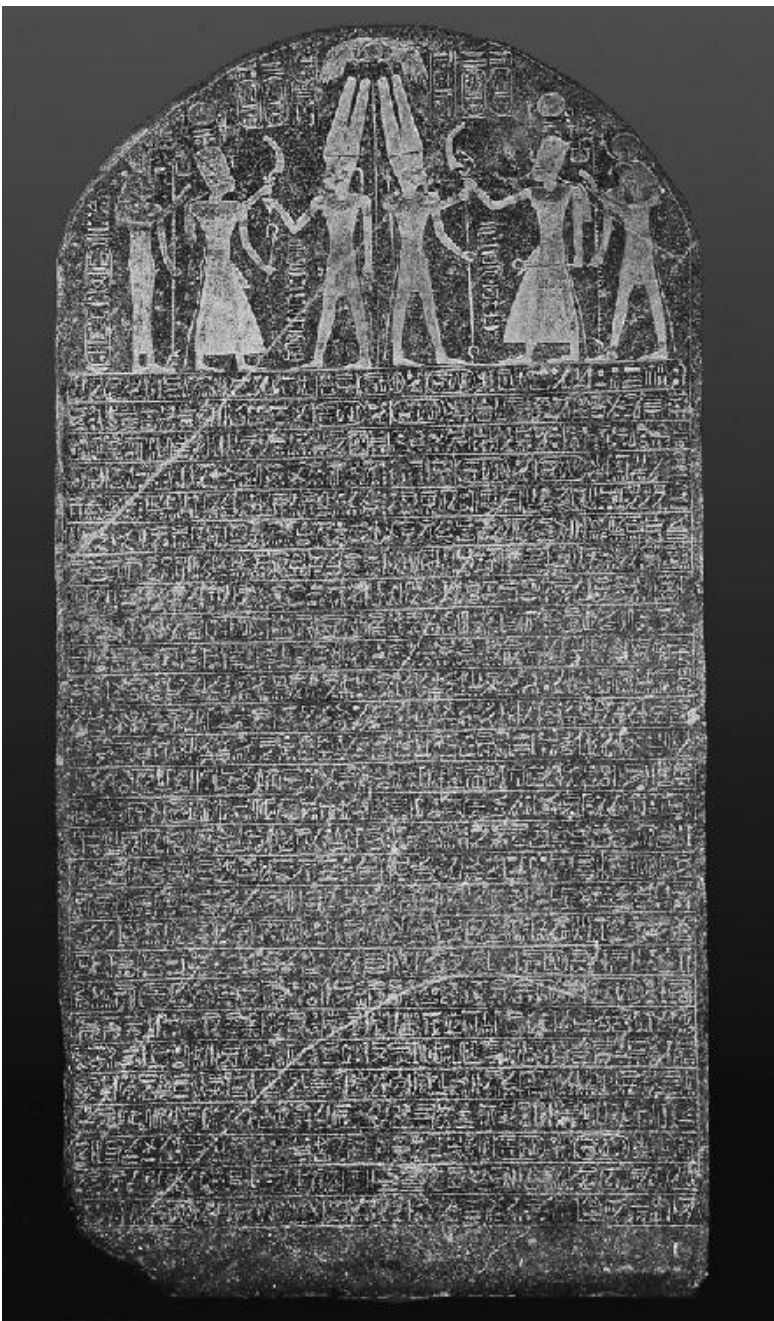


Figure 13.1 Stone Stele of Merneptah, c. 1209 BCE

Israel (as a people or tribe) is listed among the vanquished entities in Canaan. This is the earliest extrabiblical occurrence of the name.

Photo by S. Vannini. © DEA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY.

an Israelite conquest (as described in the Book of Joshua). Instead, they have

adopted theories that indicate that during the era that the Bible later claimed was the time of the Judges, Israel was created in the Palestinian hill country primarily out of groups of people who were already native to Canaan and/or the Transjordanian region (Finkelstein 1988; Dever 1992, 2003).

How and why did groups of people move to the hills, organize themselves into tribes, and join together into an entity called Israel? The answers are not known, though several hypotheses or models have been offered (Moore and Kelle 2011: 96–133). Many scholars accept the “Internal Nomadic Settlement” model of Israel Finkelstein (1988) or a modification of it (e.g., Dever 2003). This theory is a variation of an older “Peaceful Infiltration” hypothesis. It traces Israel’s origins to the Shasu seminomads of Palestine and Transjordan mentioned in Late Bronze Age Egyptian texts.

Some scholars have specifically related a major component of the later Israelites to a group of Shasu from Se’ir, a mountainous area east and southeast of the Dead Sea that was later part of Edom. Fifteenth century Egyptian lists mention a place there called “*Yhw* in the land of the Shasu.” It is suggested that the place name *Yhw* must be related to *YHWH* (Yahweh), the name of the Israelite god (Redford 1992: 272–273). Furthermore, Anson Rainey has shown that the Hebrew language is much more closely related to Transjordanian languages (such as Aramaic and Moabite) than to the Canaanite dialects spoken in coastal Palestine (2007, 2008a, 2008b). Also, the undoubtedly ancient poetry of Judges 5:4–5 seems to locate Mt. Sinai in Se’ir (Midian) and states that Yahweh comes from that region to fight for his people (Shanks 2014: 38–41). So, Rainey argues, the Israelites must have migrated from east of the Jordan as the Bible claims they did. According to Rainey, Donald Redford, and others, Shasu pastoralists began settling in the Palestinian hill country around the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age and eventually became the Tribes of Israel.

Other scholars, arguing that the Iron Age I villagers in the hills have an agrarian rather than pastoralist background, favor the “Peasants’ Revolt” theory first proposed by George Mendenhall (1961) and modified by Norman Gottwald (1979; Dever 1992: 552–553). This model proposes that Israel originated from dissident peasants who, inspired by teachings about a liberating god named Yahweh or impoverished by noble landowners and Egyptian tribute demands, revolted against their masters, attacked their city-states, and then fled to the sparsely occupied Palestinian hill country. Some adherents of this model modify it by emphasizing that the fleeing peasants were more refugees than revolutionaries. They argue that it was the effects of drought or military conflict in the plains rather than revolutionary religious ideology or long-standing economic discontent that forced many individuals to seek refuge in the hills (Callaway 1985; Stiebing 1989: 189–202; Dever 2003:

Supporters of the peasant revolt or peasant refugee theory point to the derivation of Iron Age I Israelite pottery and “four-room” house styles from those of Late Bronze Age Canaanite towns (Dever 2003: 118–125). However, similar pottery and domestic architectural traditions also existed in Late Bronze Age Transjordan (Rainey 2008a: 47–49). So, based on their pottery and houses the settlers in the Palestinian hills could have come from either the Canaanite towns or the area east of the Jordan River. However, Rainey notes that pig bones are not found in the new Iron Age I Palestinian hill country villages, while they are common in Late Bronze Age Canaanite cities and in the Philistine towns on the coast. “If,” he argues (2008a: 49), “the new settlers of the Iron Age I had come from the lowlands, where pigs were domesticated and used, why did they not continue that tradition?” On the other hand, while the steppe land east of the Jordan is well suited for raising sheep, goats, and some cattle that can easily be herded and moved, it is unsuitable for raising pigs that are hard to move and that suffer from the heat. The later Israelite dietary laws prohibiting the eating of pork, Rainey suggests, may have stemmed in part from pork’s traditional absence in the Transjordanian Shasu/Proto-Israelite diet (2008a: 49).

Therefore, based on the archaeological and linguistic evidence, it seems that in the absence of imperial control following the breakdown of the Late Bronze Age (see [Chapter 10](#)), semi-nomadic tribes from east of the Jordan River (perhaps driven by famine or Egyptian raids) settled in the Palestinian hill country. Here, they joined dispossessed Canaanite peasants and perhaps some Semitic refugees from Egypt and formed small agrarian villages grouped into generally egalitarian tribes.⁵ Probably taking the name of one of the component groups, this collection of tribes became biblical Israel. Soon afterward, as the probable drought eased, related groups of pastoralists settled down east of the Jordan and the Dead Sea in areas that supported dry farming. They would emerge as the Moabites, Edomites, and Midianites.

These Proto-Israelites came to worship a god called Yahweh, a deity we have already seen was connected with the region of Se’ir (Midian). Originally Yahweh may have been thought of as an ancestral deity, a “god of the fathers,” who was given almost exclusive worship by his people (though the existence of other gods was not denied). However, once settled in Palestine, most Proto-Israelites seem to have accepted Yahweh as another name for a familiar Canaanite god such as El or Ba’al. In fact, Yahweh’s identification with El even seems to have been officially promoted during the time of the monarchy. Local Canaanite forms of El, such as El Berith, El Bethel, El Olam, and El Shaddai, worshipped at shrines at Shechem, Bethel, and other Palestinian sites, were then claimed to be earlier names for the god Yahweh who had revealed himself

to Moses. There is also evidence that down to the time of Josiah's reforms in the seventh century BCE, Yahweh, like El or Ba'al, was thought to have a fertility goddess, Asherah, as his consort (see "Debating the Evidence: Did Israel's God Have a Wife?"). Thus, the Canaanite elements in later Israelite religion were probably not the result of "backsliding" from an early pure monotheism. They likely had been present from the time that Israel itself came into being during the early part of the Iron Age I (c. 1150–1000 BCE).

Continued study of archaeological evidence and the biblical text have shown that the nation of Israel did not emerge exactly as described in the Bible, even if we don't fully understand the process. What is important to remember, however, is that the nationalist story of the Bible resonated with the people of Israel and became their cherished "history."

Debating the Evidence: The Formation of the Israelite State

The Bible claims that after initially functioning as independent units that only sporadically participated in joint military actions, the Israelite tribes were welded together into a monarchy that embraced all twelve of the Israelite tribes. Scholars generally refer to this early state as the "United Monarchy," to contrast it with the later period (the "Divided Monarchy") when separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah existed in Palestine (see [Table 13.1](#)). In recent years, though, some scholars have questioned the reality of Israel's United Monarchy. They assert that "there were *always* two distinct highland entities, of which the southern was always the poorer, weaker, more rural, and less influential—until it rose to sudden, spectacular prominence *after* the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel" (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 150). In the view of these scholars, Palestine during the supposed era of David and Solomon was a rural backwater without any of the trappings of a formal state (e.g., urban complexes, royal citadels, writing). If they existed, David and Solomon were at best minor chieftains (Davies 1992; Finkelstein 1996; Steiner 1998; Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 123–168, 340–344; Finkelstein 2013). They support this view by arguing that Stratum VA-IVB at Megiddo, usually dated to the tenth century BCE, actually belongs to the time of Ahab, the mid-ninth century. Thus, the similar pottery and remains at various sites such as Jerusalem, Megiddo, Gezer, and Hazor usually claimed to be from the time of David and Solomon actually belong to the following century during the Omride dynasty (Shanks 1998).

The United Monarchy	
Saul (c. 1027–1006)	
David (c. 1005–970)	
Solomon (c. 970–931)	
The Divided Monarchy	
<i>Israel</i>	<i>Judah</i>
Jeroboam I (c. 931–910)	Rehoboam(c. 931–914)
Nadab (c. 909)	Abijam(c. 914–911)
Baasha (c. 909–886)	Asa (c. 911–871)
Elah and Zimri (c. 885)	
Omri (c. 885–874)	
Ahab (c. 873–852)	Jehoshaphat (c. 871–848)
Ahaziah(c. 852–851)	
Jehoram (Joram, c. 851–841)	Jehoram (c. 848–841)
Jehu (c. 841–813)	Ahaziah (c. 841)
	Athaliah (c. 841–835)
Jehoahaz (c. 813–797)	Jehoash (c. 835–796)
Jehoash (c. 797–782)	Amaziah (c. 796–767)
Jeroboam II (c. 782–747)	Uzziah (Azariah, c. 767–739)
Zechariah and Shallum (c. 747)	
Menahem (c. 747–742)	
Pekahiah (c. 742–740)	Jotham (c. 739–734)
Pekah(c. 740–731)	
Hoshea (c. 731–722/721)	Ahaz (c. 734–728)
(Conquest by Assyria in 722/721 and the end of the Kingdom of Israel)	Hezekiah (c. 728–697)
	Manasseh (c. 697–642)
	Amon (c. 642–640)
	Josiah (c. 640–609)
	Jehoahaz (609)
	Jehoiakim (609–598)
	Jehoiachin (597)
	Zedekiah (597–586)
	(End of the Judean Monarchy in 586 and the beginning of the Babylonian Exile)

Note: All dates are bce. The most important rulers' names are printed in boldface.

Although many archaeologists and biblical historians have rejected these views (e.g., Dever 1990; Na'aman 1997; Cahill 1998; Halpern 2001: 451–478;

Master 2001; Kletter 2004; A. Mazar 1997, 2007: 13–171), the debate over the early Iron Age chronology continues unabated (Levy and Higham 2014). Following Amihai Mazar, most Israeli archaeologists contend that the preponderance of evidence indicates that Stratum VA-IVB at Megiddo did belong to the tenth century BCE and, therefore, that the related material at Jerusalem and other sites did also. Recent excavations in Jerusalem just south of the Temple Mount have brought to light a monumental building, gatehouse, and tower that the excavator dates to the tenth century BCE. The excavation also uncovered the earliest known inscription from Jerusalem (E. Mazar 2009: 21, E. Mazar et al. 2013). This would be the first evidence in Jerusalem for a state-level society from the time of David and Solomon. Also, recent finds from Khirbet Qeiyafa, a fortified town that overlooked the Elah valley between Philistine territory and Judah, should also be noted. Excavators of this tenth-century BCE site have uncovered what they regard as an administrative structure and an ostrakon with a five-line West Semitic inscription (possibly in Hebrew) written in the early Proto-Canaanite script (Leval 2012; Garfinkel et al. 2013). Several scholars have presented different interpretations of the inscription, but the words for “king,” “judge,” and “slave” seem to be present. The discovery of this ostrakon suggests that writing may have been more common in tenth-century BCE Palestine than previously thought. While these archaeological finds do not prove the reality of the United Monarchy, they indicate that the existence of a literate, centralized monarchy in Judah in the tenth century BCE is clearly not as far-fetched as some critics have claimed.⁶

Literary analysis may also support the traditional view. As B.S.J. Isserlin has pointed out (1998: 7–8), if Israel and Judah developed as independent kingdoms and were never united, certain features of the biblical tradition, put into its final form by Judeans, are very difficult to understand. Why would Judeans at the time of the Exile (c. 586 BCE) or later have called themselves Israelites when the northern kingdom had often been Judah’s enemy and, in Judean traditions, is castigated for its sinful religious practices? Even more significant is the “striking fact that the deity worshipped in the temple at Jerusalem is referred to (especially by Isaiah) as ‘the God of Israel,’ but never as the god of Judah” (Isserlin 1998: 8). These features are best explained by the biblical claim that there was an early, unified Israel from which the later kingdoms of Israel and Judah derived. So, in what follows, we shall accept the existence of a United Monarchy.

The United Monarchy (c. 1027–931 BCE)

Just as Assyrian expeditions into the Lake Van area probably forced the small kingdoms of that region to unite into a single kingdom (Urartu), pressure from the expanding Philistine cities likely drove the newly formed Israelite tribes to unite more completely. The tribes had been basically autonomous, joining together temporarily only during a time of crisis under the leadership of charismatic commanders called *shophetim*. The Hebrew noun *shophet/shophetim* is usually translated “Judge/Judges” in English versions of the Bible. However, comparisons of its cognates in Phoenician and Akkadian and study of its contexts in the Bible show that the word had the more general meaning of “executive, leader, ruler” who might also function as a judge, deliverer, or arbitrator. During Israel’s formative period when the enemies were also small and relatively disorganized, limited alliances of a few tribes at a time had sufficed. But larger, better-supplied, and more efficiently organized armies were needed to withstand the Philistine forces. Saul (c. 1027–1005 BCE), a member of the small tribe of Benjamin, seems to have been chosen to solve the problem.

We know nothing about Saul (or David, Solomon, and many of their successors) except what is in the Bible, and even that information is somewhat scanty. What follows therefore is an outline of the development of the early Israelite monarchy mainly from the biblical perspective. However, as J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes have cautioned, there are no extrabiblical sources for this era except for archaeology, and it is not very useful for determining historical details. Thus, unfortunately, in these stories “there is no way to discern with certainty what is historical kernel and what is legendary elaboration” (1986: 129).

The Bible tells us that the tribes of Israel eventually united under a figure named Saul. Saul is a transition figure between leadership by “Judges” (*shophetim*) and a true monarchy. The biblical narratives usually designate Saul as *nasi* (“prince”) or *nagid* (“commander; crown prince”) rather than *melekh* (“king”), and several different accounts of his selection, both favorable (1 Samuel 9:1–10:16; 11:1–11) and unfavorable (1 Samuel 8; 10:17–27; 12), have survived. Although he was a skillful military leader (1 Samuel 14:47–48), he seems to have been unable to convert Israel from a tribal confederation into a centralized kingdom. He also failed to eliminate the Philistine threat, dying at the conclusion of an unsuccessful battle with them. (Compare the divergent traditions about Saul’s death in 1 Samuel 31:3–5 and 2 Samuel 1:6–10.) Despite these failures, Saul probably managed to stabilize Israelite control over its core territory of the central hill country and the hill country of Transjordan (the probable extent of his “kingdom”). Moreover, he inspired such devotion among most of his subjects that they wanted his son Eshba‘al to succeed him and accepted David only when there was no viable alternative.

David (r. c. 1005–970 BCE), the ideal king during a “golden age” according to later legend, probably was the first true ruler of a fully united Israel. A member of the tribe of Judah from Bethlehem, David likely began his career as an officer in Saul’s army. Compare 1 Samuel 16:14–23 with the more legendary account in 1 Samuel 17 (Halpern 2001: 18–19, 136–137, 275–276; Baden 2013: 22–26, 38–41). According to the Bible, eventually David broke with Saul and became an outlaw hiding out in the Judean hill country where he gathered together a band of fellow brigands and rebels against Saul. Then David and his army of malcontents joined the forces of a Philistine king who gave him command over a small town on the border of Judah. There, David built up his power, hiring Philistine mercenaries (Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittites) to supplement his band of former outlaws who were now also professional warriors, loyal to David alone. He used his position to endear himself to the leaders of Judah by defeating their local enemies. These maneuvers resulted in his eventually being anointed as ruler of Judah. On the other hand, when Saul and his three oldest sons died in battle, Israel chose Saul’s surviving son, Eshba‘al, as king. But after a couple of years of warfare with David and the death of Israel’s leading general, two of Eshba‘al’s own officers (possibly in collusion with David) assassinated him. The northern tribes then accepted David as king, bringing about an incorporation of Israel and Judah into one kingdom called Israel.

Though at times the David we know from the Bible could be ruthless in obtaining his objectives and proved to be incapable of handling the rivalries and intrigues within his own family, he seems to have been a gifted and charismatic military leader. His professional troops formed the core of his army, and with them, he was able to compel obedience from the Israelite tribes in ways that Saul could not. David augmented this mercenary force with Israelite tribal levies and supposedly led it to a series of stunning victories. He is credited with capturing the previously independent city of Jerusalem and making it his capital. At the time, Jerusalem seems to have been only a small, possibly unwallled town (though the Middle Bronze Age wall probably was still in use). However, it was ideally located on the border between the rival areas of Israel and Judah. The Bible says that David also established a shrine for Yahweh there, and that the city soon became the religious as well as the political capital of the new state. However, it is likely that during the United Monarchy Jerusalem remained only a royal enclave that did not have a large civilian population (Uziel and Shai 2007). Archaeological evidence from Jerusalem in this period is sparse, yet the monumental stone building excavated in the City of David could be the seat of David’s kingdom (Mazar 2009; Shanks 2016).

The Bible also claims that David went on to defeat the Philistines, his former

overlords, and drove them back into an enclave along the coast. He also supposedly defeated the nearby lands of Edom, Moab, and Ammon as well as the Aramaean state of Zobah, but how much control he exercised over these areas is debated. There is no corroborating evidence. Though his power and empire were probably not nearly as extensive as the Bible claims, he does seem to have built Israel into a state rather than just a chieftainship. His fame was lasting; a hundred years after his death, an Aramaean ruler of Damascus called the southern Hebrew kingdom not Judah, but “the House of David” (see [Figure 13.2](#)).

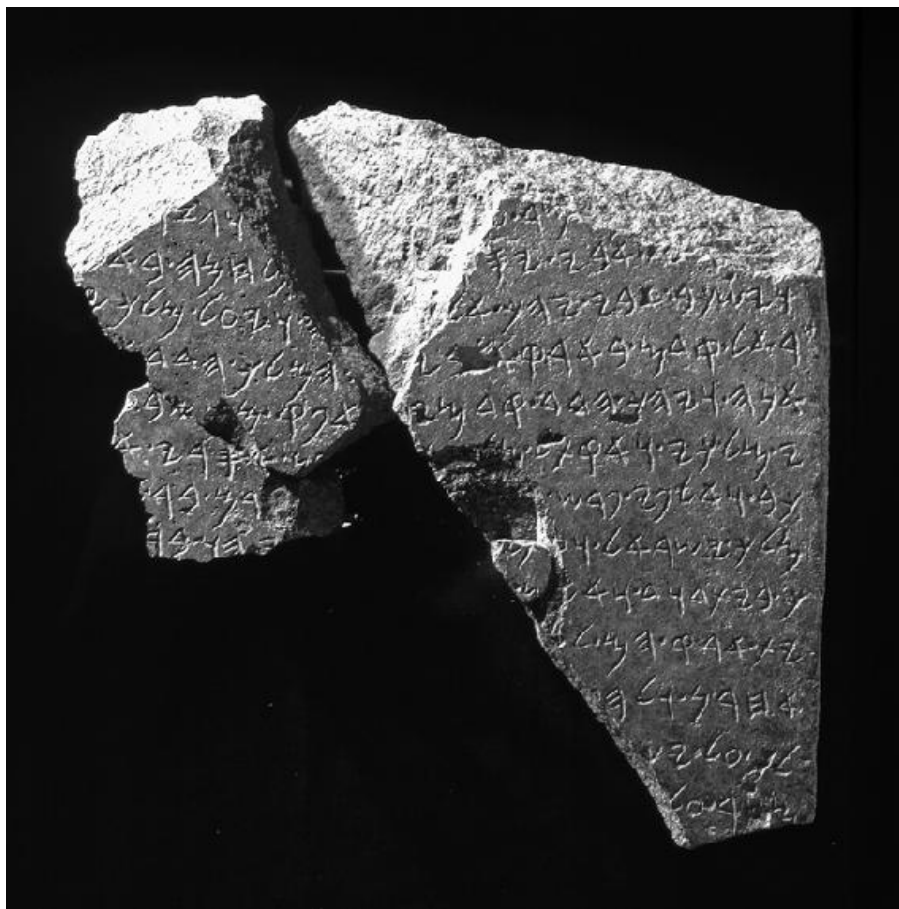


Figure 13.2 A Fragmentary Aramaean Victory Stele from Dan in Israel

This stele celebrates a victory by a king of Damascus (Hazael or Ben-Hadad II) over Israel and Judah (called the “House of David” on the stele).

Courtesy of Tel Dan Excavations, Hebrew Union College, Nelson Glueck School of Archaeology, Jerusalem. Photo by Zev Radovan.

David’s successor, Solomon (c. 970–931 BCE), probably consolidated and

developed the state that David had created. According to the Bible, he better organized the central administration and divided the country into twelve administrative districts that did not correspond to the old tribal boundaries. Each district would support the court for one month a year. He also supposedly engaged in a major construction program during his reign. The Bible claims that he fortified Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer, important cities guarding major trade routes or possible invasion routes into the kingdom. At these sites (as well as at Ashdod and Lachish), archaeologists have found very similar tenth-century BCE six-chambered monumental gateways (see [Figure 13.3](#)). Following Israel Finkelstein, a few archaeologists date these gates to the following century, but most have rejected the arguments for this proposal and continue to see the gates as evidence of Solomon's building activities. He may also have constructed a series of forts in the Negev to guard oases and the kingdom's southern approaches, but the dates for those southern forts so far excavated by archaeologists are difficult to determine. Solomon's most famous building activity, of course, is supposed to have occurred in Jerusalem. There may be some archaeological support for the biblical claim that he increased Jerusalem's size, erecting a temple for Yahweh on a previously unoccupied hill just north of the city and a palace for himself just south of the temple (Cahill 1998).

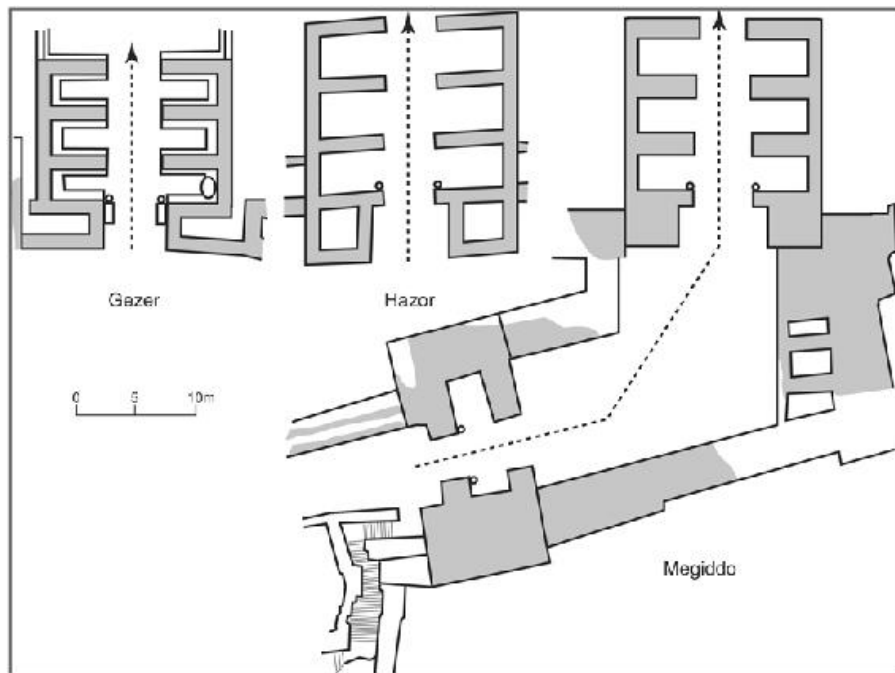


Figure 13.3 Plans of Tenth-Century BCE Gates at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo

The outer gate at Megiddo was probably added later.

Adapted from Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 BCE* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 384.

In foreign affairs, Solomon is supposed to have maintained good relations with Egypt and entered into an alliance with King Hiram I of Tyre. It is claimed that Hiram provided craftsmen to design and construct the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, which seems to have had the three-room Canaanite temple plan that had been common since the Middle Bronze Age. The Tyrians purportedly also built a fleet of ships for Israel on the Gulf of Aqaba and participated with Solomon in joint trading expeditions to Ophir and Africa. In exchange, Tyre received access to trade routes that passed through Israelite territory, half the profits from the joint trade missions, and twenty cities in the rich agricultural area of the Acco Plain and the northwestern end of the Jezreel valley.

To pay for his construction projects and his luxurious lifestyle, the Bible says that Solomon collected tribute from the subject nations David had conquered and taxed trade that passed through the territory he controlled. Israel's importance to the Arabian spice trade is suggested by the later folkloric biblical account of a visit to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba (a kingdom in southern Arabia). Solomon probably also received income from his commercial ventures. Nevertheless, the probably considerable income from these sources was not enough, so Solomon supposedly also taxed his own people heavily. Moreover, it is claimed that he secured manpower for his building enterprises by subjecting his citizens to *corvée* labor.

In addition to the high taxes and *corvée* labor, the social changes caused by creation of a bureaucracy were very unpopular, especially with some members of the northern tribes according to 1 Kings. The Bible says that there was also some discontent with Solomon's religious policies, which allowed his foreign wives, brought into his harem as a result of diplomatic marriages, to worship their own gods in the Jerusalem temple. Despite his increasing unpopularity that led to at least one revolt, Solomon managed to maintain his throne until he died. Soon after his death, though, the United Monarchy came to an end. As we have seen, the biblical account cannot yet be verified archaeologically. While much of the account of the rise and fall of the Israelite United Monarchy has the ring of truth, the tradition was likely highly embellished later to serve the nationalist and ideological goals of the Bible's authors.

The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah

The Early Divided Monarchy (c. 931–885 BCE)

When Solomon died (c. 931 BCE), representatives of the northern tribes purportedly demanded that his son Rehoboam promise to make changes. He balked, so the ten northern tribes refused to accept him as their ruler. They kept the name Israel (which probably had originated in the central hill country) and chose Jeroboam, a former rebel against Solomon, as king. Only Judah and the small tribe of Benjamin remained loyal to David's line, becoming the kingdom of Judah (see [Table 13.1](#)). Historians are on somewhat firmer ground when dealing with the era of the Divided Monarchy following Solomon's death. Some characters in the biblical accounts of this period are also mentioned in other Near Eastern sources, allowing chronological synchronisms and somewhat more confidence in the general historicity of the biblical text. So, while there are still some questions and debates about specific elements in the biblical accounts, there is not as much wholesale skepticism as there is about the stories of Israel's history up to the death of Solomon.

Soon after the split, Pharaoh Sheshonq I of Egypt (called Shishak in the Bible) tried to reassert Egyptian control over all of Palestine, causing widespread destruction in both kingdoms. Destructions at several sites, most notably Megiddo, have been linked to these campaigns. However, his supposed attack on Jerusalem (1 Kings 14:25) is not recorded in the Egyptian record. Though this resurgence by Egypt was fleeting (Sheshonq died soon after his Palestinian campaign), it weakened both Israel and Judah, ensuring that the break between them would remain permanent. Jerusalem continued to be the capital of Judah, and Solomon's temple remained the focal point for its worship. On the other hand, Jeroboam I (c. 931–910 BCE) not only had to choose a capital for Israel, but also had to make provisions for the national religious cult. The Bible says that he established centers for the worship of Yahweh at Bethel and Dan, cities near the southern and northern borders of his kingdom, respectively. The later biblical editors considered him an idolater because he placed golden statues of young bulls within these temples. Although traditionally associated with the Canaanite god Ba'al, these statues were probably devoted to Yahweh as well. In Jerusalem, Yahweh was thought to be invisibly enthroned above the Ark of the Covenant between two large statues of cherubim, winged, sphinx-like, semi-divine figures with human heads and the bodies of bulls or lions. (In Canaanite mythology, cherubim were thought to guard divinities and kings and were sometimes depicted on the sides of royal thrones.) At Bethel and Dan, Yahweh was probably believed to be invisibly standing on the back of a bull in the way that Ba'al was often depicted.

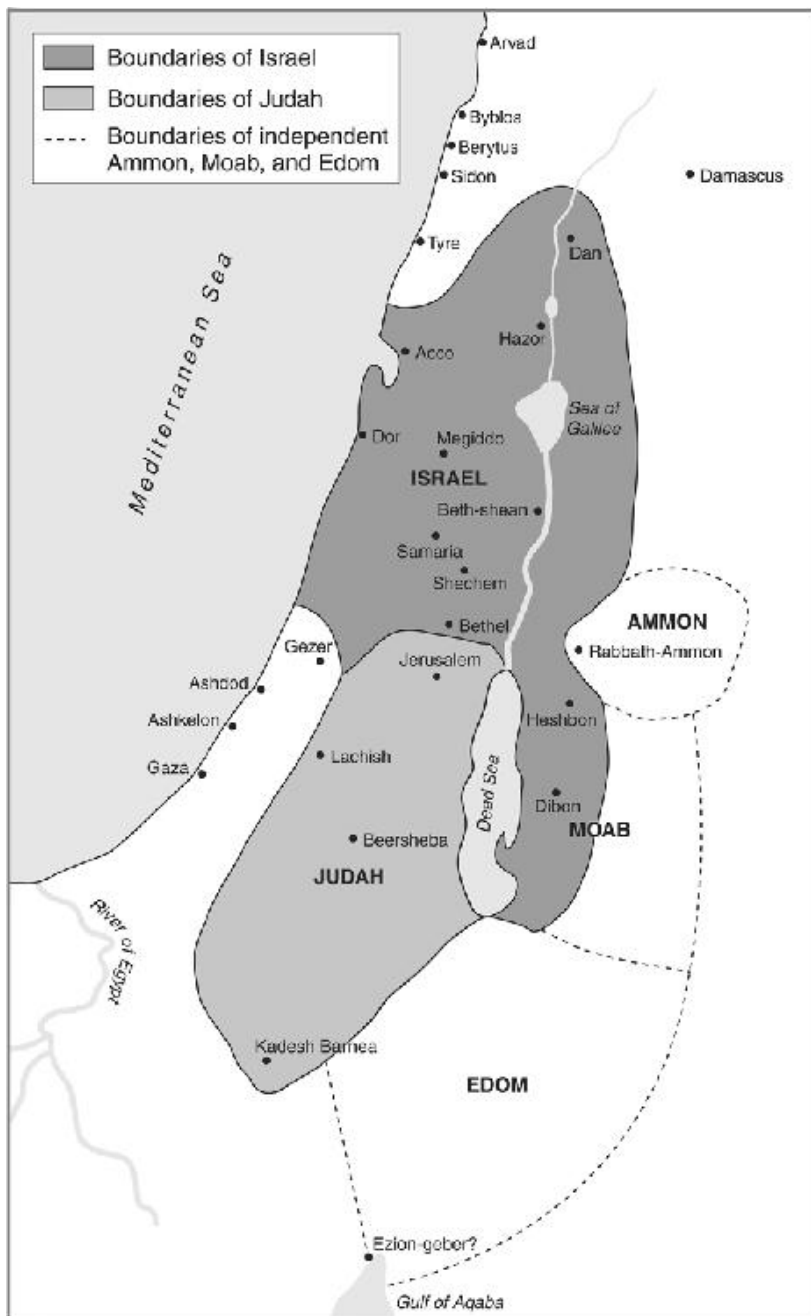
Throughout the era of the Divided Monarchy, Judah had a relatively stable government under descendants of David. These southern monarchs generally ruled with strong religious backing, for they seem to have persuaded religious leaders and the people that Yahweh had formed a covenant with David, promising that his dynasty would rule the nation forever. It was the smaller, weaker, less populous, and poorer of the two states, but that fact made it less attractive to possible invaders. Israel, on the other hand, experienced several revolutions and changes of dynasties, all accomplished by military leaders. Prophetic denunciations of various kings helped produce this instability, for many people in the northern kingdom seem to have continued to accept the old tradition of charismatic leadership that had existed during the time of the “Judges.” A valid king should show signs that he was Yahweh’s chosen one, these people thought. Thus, if a king lost a war or religious leaders or prophets attacked his policies, he was likely to face a military revolt led by one of his ambitious officers. Moreover, Israel’s relative wealth, nearness to Phoenicia and Damascus, position astride important trade routes, and lack of natural barriers to invasion all made it more attractive to Aramaeans, Assyrians, and other would-be conquerors (see [Map 13.1](#)).

The Era of Israelite Ascendancy (c. 885–841 BCE)

Israel entered its greatest era of power and prosperity almost fifty years after its creation when Omri, an army commander, seized power. Omri (c. 885–874 BCE) crushed his opposition and restored a semblance of stability after the series of military defeats, coups, civil wars, and assassinations that followed the death of Jeroboam I (c. 910 BCE). He built a new, strongly fortified capital city in the center of the country at Samaria. He also seems to have regained control over areas of Israel previously captured by the king of Damascus and rebuilt cities like Dan and Hazor that the Aramaeans had destroyed. To strengthen his hand against Damascus, Omri entered into a pact with King Ithoba‘al I of Tyre (c. 887–856 BCE), marrying his son Ahab to Ithoba‘al’s daughter Jezebel to cement the bond. He also ended the long conflict with Judah, creating an alliance between the two kingdoms in which Israel was the dominant partner. The marriage of Omri’s daughter (or, less likely, granddaughter) Athaliah to Jehoram, son and heir of Judah’s king, Jehoshaphat, strengthened this alliance. Omri also once again conquered most of Moab, regaining control over “the King’s Highway,” the major trade route through Transjordan. These actions seem to have been effective, for not only did the conflict with Damascus cease, but also during the reign of Omri’s son,

Israel and Aram-Damascus became allies against Assyria. Though he reigned for only twelve years, he so impressed the Assyrians that even after his dynasty had been overthrown and replaced, they continued to call Israel “the House of Omri.”

Omri’s successor, Ahab (c. 873–852 BCE), continued the developments his father had started, building Israel into one of the strongest states in the region. As we have seen, Ahab contributed the second largest contingent of troops (and the largest number of chariots) to



Map 13.1 The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah at the Time of Omri (c. 885–874 BCE)

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

the coalition army that met Shalmaneser III at Qarqar in 853 BCE (see [Document 10.1](#) in [Chapter 10](#)). His reign also seems to have increased the prosperity begun during Omri's time. He completed the building projects his

father had started, with key buildings constructed in Phoenician style out of carefully cut and smoothed stones (ashlars) with rectangular stone columns surmounted by carved Proto-Aeolic capitals.⁷ These buildings and the houses of the Israelite aristocracy contained furniture inlaid with beautifully carved pieces of ivory, much of it probably imported from Tyre.

The Bible remembers Ahab as a very wicked king, claiming he was despotic and unscrupulous. His main sin in the eyes of the biblical authors, though, was allowing his wife Jezebel to build temples to Tyrian Ba'al (Melqart) in Israel. Despite the later biblical condemnation of his religious policies, it is clear that Ahab still worshipped Yahweh as Israel's national deity, for he gave his children Ahaziah and Jehoram Yahwistic names ("Yahweh has seized [him]" and "Yahweh has exalted [him]" respectively).

Probably Yahweh had already assimilated the characteristics of the local manifestations of El and Ba'al in Israel and Judah, including having Asherah as his consort. But the introduction of a foreign cult with its own temples, priests, and prophets seems to have provoked a nationalistic response on the part of many Israelite worshippers of Yahweh. The prophet Elijah seems to have led the opposition to the royal policies, galvanizing and creating support for the "Yahweh alone" movement that would insist on exclusive worship of the national god. As P. Kyle McCarter Jr. has noted, this was not really a conflict between the worship-pers of Ba'al and the worshippers of Yahweh (McCarter 1999: 142). Rather, the struggle was between supporters of an inclusive Yahwism that did not forbid the worship of other gods (a view accepted by the ruling class and probably most of the people) and those who accepted an exclusive Yahwism (the party of the prophets).

From this clash grew the classical prophetic movement that would be instrumental in shaping the central concepts of the biblical tradition. The Israelites and Judeans, like the Mesopotamians, Aramaeans, and Canaanites, believed that the divine will could be revealed not only through professional prophets attached to the cult, but also through ordinary individuals (Nissinen 2003). The classical biblical prophets normally presented their messages as the direct speech of God, introduced by "thus says Yahweh" (usually rendered "thus says the LORD" in English translations). Especially from the time of Elijah onward, a series of such prophets would arise to denounce the worship of deities other than Yahweh and attack many of the Canaanite practices that had long been part of both popular religion and the national cult.

Israel and Judah Become Vassals of Damascus and Assyria (c. 841–721 BCE)

Following Ahab's death, Queen Jezebel remained influential during the reigns of her sons, Ahaziah (c. 852–851 BCE) and Jehoram (also written Joram, c. 851–841 BCE). However, they were not able to continue the Israelite ascendancy that their grandfather and father had established. Moab revolted against Israelite control, and under the leadership of Mesha, a native of the city of Dibon, secured its freedom and even conquered some Transjordanian portions of Israel (see [Document 10.2](#) in [Chapter 10](#)). Also, Aram-Damascus became an enemy once again when Hazael usurped that kingdom's throne c. 845 BCE. So, around 842–841 BCE the Aramaean army moved southward and inflicted stinging defeats on the Israelite forces and their Judean allies. An Aramaic stele erected at Tel Dan and found there by archaeologists in the 1990s ([Figure 13.2](#)) may be a physical record of Hazael's victories. The Bible says that Jehoram was badly wounded in a battle near the Transjordanian border town of Ramoth-Gilead and retired to the royal residence at Jezreel to recuperate. His nephew Ahaziah, the new king of Judah, accompanied him. Jehu, an army commander who had been proclaimed King of Israel by his fellow officers, took control of Jezreel, killed both kings, and ordered the queen mother Jezebel thrown out of one of the palace's upper windows. Jehu (r. c. 841–813 BCE) then slaughtered the remaining descendants of Omri as well as several members of the Judean royal family who had accompanied their king on his visit to Israel. However, as we noted in [Chapter 10](#), because the former alliance between Israel and Aram-Damascus no longer existed, Jehu had to become a vassal of Assyria ([Figure 13.4](#)).



From the Black Obelisk found at Nimrud. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

When news of Jehu's usurpation and the death of Jehoram and Ahaziah of Judah reached Jerusalem, Ahaziah's mother, Queen Athaliah, the only surviving member of Omri's line, decided to seize power in Judah. Possibly backed by an Israelite royal guard that had accompanied her to Jerusalem during the days when Israel had dominated Judah, she killed all of her former husband's other sons except an infant, Jehoash, who was hidden by his sister and the temple's priests. Athaliah (c. 841–835 BCE) reigned into her seventh year, becoming the first female ruler of Judah and the last until Hellenistic times. She was also the only pre-exilic Judean monarch other than Saul who was not from the line of David. Her reign came to an end when the palace guard, now presumably composed mostly of Judeans once again, secretly assembled in the temple to protect the seven-year-old Jehoash who was brought out of hiding and crowned king. When Athaliah tried to stop the proceedings, she was apprehended and killed. Thus, the Line of David was restored on the throne of Judah. It is possible that this restoration inspired an exceptional writer to produce the account of Israel's early history that biblical scholars call "the Yahwist Narrative" or *J* (now much of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and possibly parts of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 Kings).⁸

The final decades of the ninth century BCE saw Aramaean renewed domination of Israel and Judah. However, after Assyria defeated Ben-Hadad II of Damascus in 796 BCE, a degree of peace and affluence returned to both kingdoms. Assyria was wracked by natural disasters and internal strife for four decades after the death of Adad-nirari in 783 BCE, leaving a power vacuum in the region. So, during the long reign of Jeroboam II (c. 782–747 BCE), Israel not only recaptured the territory east of the Jordan that Hazael had conquered, but probably even subjugated parts of Syria itself. In Judah, the reign of Uzziah (Azariah, c. 767–739 BCE) was also generally one of stability and well-being, though Judah was once again virtually a vassal of Israel. However, during this time, the gulf between rich and poor became greater than ever before. Moreover, the prosperity of the estate-owning aristocracy, especially in Israel, was often at the expense of formerly independent farmers who lost their land and were forced to become tenant farmers. Amos, Hosea, and slightly later prophets such as Isaiah and Micah denounced such social and economic inequities while continuing to insist that Yahweh alone be worshipped. Their teachings culminated in the emergence of true monotheism and many of the moral aspects of the biblical tradition.

Israel and Judah's autonomy ended, however, when Tiglath-pileser III came to the throne of Assyria in 744 BCE and quickly restored Assyrian power. He

defeated the forces of Damascus, the Philistines, and Israel, while Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Judah paid tribute and became semi-independent vassals of Assyria. He incorporated coastal territory from Dor to Gaza as well as Israel's Galilean and Transjordanian territories into Assyrian provinces and supported the assassination of the Israelite king Pekah (c. 740–731) by Hoshea (c. 731–722/721), who then swore fealty to Tiglath-pileser. Assyria became the dominant power in the Near East once again. Judah and the remnant of Israel remained subservient throughout Tiglath-pileser III's reign, but when he died in 727 BCE, Israel's king Hoshea revolted. The new Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V (726–722 BCE) ravaged the remaining Israelite territory and laid siege to Samaria, Israel's capital. Though Samaria held out for three years, Shalmaneser probably succeeded in capturing it as the Bible (2 Kings 17:4–6; 18:9–10) and the Babylonian Chronicle claim. He must have died (possibly by assassination) soon afterwards, however, for his successor, Sargon II (721–705 BCE), likely a usurper, claimed the conquest of Samaria for himself. Whatever the truth about who actually conquered the city, Sargon deported most of the Israelite upper classes to Assyria and divided the country into four Assyrian provinces: Dor, Megiddo, Gilead, and Samaria which were resettled with peoples from elsewhere. Assyrian governors administered these areas from Assyrian style buildings, an example of which has been excavated at Megiddo. The kingdom of Israel ceased to exist. However, the small, impoverished kingdom of Judah, spared the depredations of the Assyrians in 722/721, would continue as an independent state for nearly a century and a half.

The Emergence of Biblical Monotheism

Canaanite Elements in Early Israelite Religion

In hindsight, it seems that one of the Near East's most important contributions to later civilization, the concept of monotheism, was being developed in Palestine during the eighth through the sixth centuries BCE (Gnuse 1997: especially 69–128). Most Jews and Christians accept the Bible's claim that the ancient Israelites and Judeans worshipped only one god, Yahweh, from at least the time of Moses onward, though some of them occasionally departed from their monotheistic faith by worshipping Ba'al and other deities. But were the early Israelites really monotheistic? That is, did they believe that there is only one god and no others? Many passages in the Bible seem to recognize the

existence of other gods. For example, Psalm 86:8 states that “there is no one like you among the gods, O Yahweh,” and Psalm 95:3 declares that Yahweh is “a great king above all gods” (see also Exodus 15:11, 18:11; Joshua 22:22; Psalm 138:1, etc.). Moreover, even the two most famous passages usually interpreted as expressing monotheism, the beginning of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) and the *Shema*[‘] (Deuteronomy 6:4), actually do not deny the existence of other gods. In the Ten Commandments, Yahweh demands that “you [Israel] must have no other gods besides me.”⁹ And the famous *Shema*[‘], often translated, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One,” actually should be rendered, “Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone.” What is being commanded is henotheism (or monolatry)—that is, exclusive worship of one god without denying the existence of others. So, even many conservative biblical scholars characterize early Israel’s religion as henotheistic rather than monotheistic (e.g., Lemaire 2007: 19–47).

The Bible depicts not only Moses and later generations as henotheistic, but the earlier Patriarchs as well. Though in the Pentateuch the Patriarchs worship several localized manifestations of the god El (such as El Shaddai, El Elyon, El Olam, El Roi) at various Canaan-ite shrines, the authors of these passages interpret these originally Canaanite divine names as appellations of the Israelite god, Yahweh (“Almighty God,” “God Most High,” “Eternal God,” and “The All-Seeing God”), rather than epithets of El, the Canaanite God. However, the Bible admits that after their settlement in Canaan, many Israelites often abandoned the Mosaic faith and began worshipping Canaanite deities. Over the past several decades, though, many biblical scholars and archaeologists have abandoned the traditional view that Israel’s official religion was monotheistic or henotheistic throughout the monarchic period. These scholars contend that for a large portion of ancient Israel’s history, even henotheism probably was accepted by only a minority of the population.

Since the 1930s CE, excavations at Ugarit in Syria and at sites in Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon have provided a wealth of material to supplement the information on ancient Canaanite religion found in the Bible and in Classical Greek and Roman works (see [Chapter 10](#)). It is now clear that El (whose name was the common word for “god” in Northwest Semitic languages) was the head of the Canaanite pantheon. He was the creator god and the father of all the gods. However, the most popular male deity was El’s son, Ba’al, whose real name was Hadad. Ba’al (or “Baal” as it is usually written in English translations of the Bible) is a title meaning “lord” or “master.”

As we have seen in [Chapter 10](#), Ba’al Hadad was a god of storms and life-giving rain often depicted wielding a lightning bolt as his weapon. The bull was the sacred animal and symbol of both El and Ba’al, and in southern Canaan (Palestine), these two deities seem to have become somewhat

identified with one another or fused into one god. For example, a temple at Shechem that excavations have shown predated the Israelite settlement (Wright 1965: 95–102; Campbell 1993: Vol. 4, 1352) is called the Temple of El-Berith in Judges 9:46 and the Temple of Ba‘al-Berith in Judges 8:33 and 9:4. The fact that “Ba‘al” is a title rather than a personal name probably facilitated this process. The most popular female deities were Asherah, wife of El and mother of the gods, and Ashtart (Astarte in Greek, Ashtoreth in the Bible, equivalent to the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar). They were both goddesses of fertility whose roles were so similar that they also were often almost interchangeable (Hess 2007: 322–324).

Archaeological finds suggest that most Israelites accepted elements of Canaanite religion from the beginning of their settlement in Canaan (c. 1200 BCE), if not earlier. An early twelfth century BCE shrine near Dothan from the central hill country then being settled by the Israelites contained a bronze bull figurine similar to those found at Canaanite shrines and temples from the Late Bronze Age (A. Mazar 1990: 350–351, 1993: Vol. 1, 266–267; Lemaire 2007: 32–33). Bulls continued to be associated with Yahweh into the monarchic period as evidenced by the statues of young bulls that Jeroboam I (c. 931–910 BCE) placed in the temples he erected to Yahweh at Dan and Bethel. This use of bulls as emblematic animals of Yahweh probably indicates his identification with El and/or Ba‘al.

The Israelites also continued the Canaanite custom of using standing stones, either hewn or uncut, to represent deities. As we have seen ([Chapter 10](#)), such stones were called *maṣṣebōt* in Hebrew or, according to the Greeks, betyls (from Canaanite *bet-el*, “dwelling of god”). These standing stones were placed within or in front of temples or in open-air sanctuaries (called *bamōt*, “high places” in the Bible). Archaeologists have excavated several Canaanite “high places,” temples, and shrines with standing stones from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (c. 1900–1150 BCE). However, they also have found Iron Age Israelite examples at Tell el-Far‘ah (North) (Chambon 1993: 439), in the Holy of Holies of a temple at Arad (Aharoni 1993: 83, 84), and very recently at Khirbet Qeiyafa (a small site from the time of David, c. 1000 BCE).¹⁰

A collection of votive objects from a foundation deposit in an early Israelite layer at Hazor included a statuette of a male deity similar to a Late Bronze Age image of El uncovered at Megiddo. Moreover, a tenth-century BCE cult stand from Ta’anach in Israel ([Figure 13.5](#)) has images of a heavenly deity (a horse or young bull with a sun disc) and two depictions of Asherah (on section two as a Tree of Life and at the bottom as a nude female) accompanied by lions, her symbolic animals. In addition, there is also a space on the third section from the top for a deity standing or seated between two cherubim (human-headed winged lions). The space between the cherubim on this section is not broken.

No image was ever put there, so the god for that portion of the stand seems to have been invisible (a characteristic of Yahweh in the Scriptures). Also, cherubim are the usual companions of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible (see, for example, Exodus 25:17–21; 1 Kings 6:23–27; Psalm 18:10). Since the second and fourth sections (counting from the top) are dedicated to the same goddess, probably the first and third also belong to the same god, one variously called El, Ba‘al, or Yahweh (Taylor 1987, 1988; Hess 2007: 322–324). This evidence suggests that many (if not most) early Israelites viewed Yahweh as another name for El (Smith 2001: 139–145) or Ba‘al, recognized Asherah as his consort, and continued worshipping him at Canaanite shrines.

We sometimes find the use of “Ba‘al” as a term for Yahweh in names of places and people in the Bible. (However, in a few instances, later editors replaced “Ba‘al” with *bosheth*, “shame.”)¹¹ In 2 Samuel 5:20, David is said to have named a place Ba‘al-Perazim (“Ba‘al has broken through”) because “Yahweh has broken through my enemies.” Evidently, in the period before about 600 BCE there was no widespread belief that use of the term “Ba‘al” to refer to Yahweh as well as to the Canaanite god Hadad might be considered improper or blasphemous.

On the contrary, one biblical writer openly used a Canaanite title of Ba‘al-Hadad for Yahweh. Psalm 68:4 (verse 5 in Hebrew) describes Yahweh as he “who rides upon the clouds,” a title of Ba‘al in Canaanite myth. Moreover, biblical authors not only appropriated Ba‘al’s titles for Yahweh, but also borrowed and modified some Canaanite myths about him (see [Document 13.1](#)). The widespread Near Eastern idea that creation took place after a battle



Figure 13.5 A Tenth-Century BCE Cult Stand from Ta'anach

Asherah or her symbolic tree is depicted in sections two and four (from the top), indicating she was worshipped in ancient Israel, probably as the consort of Yahweh. The other two sections may depict El or Ba'al (section 1) and Yahweh (section 3?).

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between the Creator (Yahweh in the Bible) and a preexisting chaotic Sea is

found in several biblical passages as well as in Canaanite myths. Genesis 1:1–3 (written by the relatively late Priestly author) reflects a demythologized version of this concept in which chaos (*tehom*, “the deep” in most English translations) is inanimate and does not fight against God. *Tehom* in Hebrew is linguistically equivalent to Tiamat, a watery chaotic creature in Mesopotamian mythology. Though *tehom* is passive in Genesis 1, other passages reflect the earlier mythological story in which Yahweh fights against a personalized “Sea” and/or its accompanying sea monsters. In fact, Isaiah 27:1 (promising a new creation in the future) reflects phrases from the Ba‘al myth ([Document 13.1](#)) almost verbatim:

On that day Yahweh with his fierce,
mighty and powerful sword,
Will punish Leviathan, the Primeval Serpent,
Leviathan, the Coiled Serpent.
He will slay Tannin [the Dragon or Sea Serpent] that is in the sea.

(translation by W. Stiebing)

Document 13.1 The Conflict between Ba‘al and the Forces of Chaos

A fragmentary Canaanite myth found at Ugarit in coastal Syria speaks of the victory of Ba‘al and his consort Anat over the primeval chaotic Sea, Yamm, and his accompanying sea monsters. This myth was ultimately based on a much older Mesopotamian creation myth. In the Mesopotamian version the two watery forces of chaos are a male called Absu (from which, through Greek, we get the word “abyss”) and a female named Tiamat (Hebrew *Tehom*, “the Deep”). The translations are by W. Stiebing. For the cuneiform texts see Dietrich, et al., eds. (1995: 1.3, iii, 38–41 and 1.5, i, 1). For slightly different translations see Smith (2001: 34 and 33) and Wyatt (2002: 79 and 115).

What enemy rises up against Ba‘al;
What foe against him who rides upon the clouds?
Haven’t I struck down Yamm [Sea], beloved of El;
Haven’t I destroyed Nahar [River], the great god?
Haven’t I bound the jaws of Tannin [the Dragon or Sea Serpent],
Holding him in a muzzle?
I have struck down the coiled serpent,
The encircling one with seven heads.

And later in the same myth the Canaanite poet alludes to the battle

once again by having Mot (Death) tell Ba'al not to boast:

Though you have struck down Litan, the Primeval Serpent,
Finished off the coiled serpent,
The encircling one with seven heads.

Psalms 74:13–15 also refers to Yahweh's defeat of the chaotic Primeval Waters who, as in Canaanite sources, is called Yam ("Sea") and Neharot ("[Primordial] Rivers") as well as their supporting monsters, Leviathan ("the Coiled One" or "Twisting One"), and Tannin ("Sea Serpent"). "Leviathan" in the Bible and "Litan" (or "Lothan" in some translations) in the Canaanite myth are almost certainly the same name (*LTN* in Ugaritic and *LWYTN* in Hebrew), though we cannot be sure how either word was pronounced originally.

You shattered Yam by your power;
You smashed the heads of Tannin,
most treacherous of the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan,
and gave him as food to the *sharks* (?) [the Hebrew reads "desert dwellers"].
You made openings for springs and torrents,
and turned Neharot into dry land.

(Translation by W. Stiebing)

The biblical reference to the "heads" of Tannin/Leviathan is illuminated by the Canaanite description of Litan as "the encircling one with seven heads." Biblical allusions to the battle between God and the chaotic Sea or sea monster occur also in Psalm 89:9–10; Job 3:8, 7:12, 9:13, 26:12–13, 40:25, 41:1–10; and Isaiah 51:9b–10a. In some passages the enemy is also called Rahab ("the Raging One"?) or Tehom ("Primeval Ocean"). However, most English translations reduce the mythological imagery of these verses by translating some of the terms for God's opponents as ordinary words ("sea," "rivers," "deep") instead of personal names as they are in Canaanite or Mesopotamian myths.

Debating the Evidence: Did Israel's God Have a Wife?



Figure 13.6 Drawing of Part of a Storage Jar from Kuntillet 'Ajrud

Its inscription blesses an individual by “Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah.” The accompanying figures *may* depict Yahweh and Asherah.

Ze'ev Meshel (2012) Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, Figure 6.5, p. 147.

The tenth-century BCE cult stand from Ta'anach (Figure 13.5) suggests that Yahweh was identified with Ba'al and had Asherah as his consort. However, textual evidence from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE *clearly* seems to associate Yahweh with Canaanite deities, especially Asherah, who seems to have been considered his female partner (e.g., Meshel 1979; Freedman 1987; Olyan 1988; Hadley 2000; Stern 2001; Dever 2005). Inscriptions found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom bless individuals by “Yahweh and his Asherah” (Meshel 1979; Lemaire 2007: 59–60, 61; Ahituv et al. 2012: 87–101). One of these inscriptions on a storage jar is even illustrated by a drawing of a bull-headed god and a cow-headed goddess (Figure 13.6). Though it is not absolutely certain that the drawings go with the inscription, they possibly are representations of Yahweh and Asherah. Others identify the image as the Egyptian god Bes (Ahituv et al. 2012: 129). If these figures are meant to depict

Yahweh and Asherah, their bovine features may be another reflection of Yahweh's identification with Ba'al, whose symbol was a bull (Coogan 1987; McCarter 1987 vs. Tigay 1987). Further support of the Yahweh-Asherah relationship comes from figurines. Archaeologists have found many female fertility figurines (probably representing Asherah) in excavated eighth- and seventh-century BCE Judean towns (e.g., McCarter 2011b: 161). A few Israelite sites have also produced clay shrines with symbols of Asherah on them, including one that has a throne for two deities, possibly Yahweh and Asherah (Dever 2008; Shanks 2011a).¹²

However, not all biblical scholars and archaeologists who utilize the historical-critical method for biblical study accept these claims (Ahituv et al. 2012: 129–132). Some argue that since the inscriptions refer to “Yahweh and *his* Asherah,” they do not refer to the goddess, for personal names normally do not have possessive pronouns such as “his” attached to them. Also, most of the forty references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible clearly refer to a wooden cult object (a pole or a stylized tree), not to a goddess. Only in one passage (1 Kings 18:19) is Asherah definitely a goddess (one who has her own prophets), and that reference may be a later interpolation into the text (Ahituv 2006: 64–65). In five other passages “Asherah” *might* refer to a goddess, but those passages are ambiguous—they could also be referring to the Asherah that is a wooden pole or stylized tree of some sort (Ahituv 2006: 64–65).¹³ Moreover, the Bible never mentions the existence of a temple or altar for Asherah, as we might expect if she were a widely worshipped goddess. Her name is not used as the divine element in Israelite and Judean personal names either, nor is she mentioned in Phoenician (i.e., Canaanite) inscriptions, a fact that some scholars regard as strange if she had been a popular goddess worshipped in those kingdoms (Tigay 1986: 12, 65–73, 83–85; Lemaire 2007: 58–59; Ahituv et al. 2012: 131).

But what of the many female figurines found by archaeologists? This scholarly camp does not regard them as images of a goddess, but rather as “prayers in clay.” According to Shmuel Ahituv,

they were used by women who prayed for lactation; hence the large breasts. The use of these statuettes is likened to the practice of some religious pilgrims today who, for example, leave a replica of a foot at a holy site as a prayer to heal an ailing foot.

(Ahituv 2006: 66; see also Lemaire 2007: 62)

So, this group of scholars characterizes Israelite religion during the monarchic period as monotheistic or at least henotheistic.

Despite these arguments, it seems that a majority of archaeologists and critically oriented biblical scholars regards Asherah as a goddess who was worshipped in Israel and Judah as Yahweh's female partner. The absence of

Phoenician and Israelite personal names referring to Asherah in monarchic times is not persuasive, for her name does not appear in personal names at Late Bronze Age Ugarit where textual evidence proves that she was worshipped as a goddess (Olyan 1988: 35–36). The female figurines with big breasts are usually found in private *houses*, not at shrines, so they are not really like objects left at a holy site to thank a deity for answering a prayer or as a reminder of a prayer that needs to be answered. They are more like the statuettes or pictures of Jesus or various saints that many Christians keep in their homes as images of heavenly figures to whom they pray. Both sides in this controversy agree that the vast majority of biblical references to Asherah are to the wooden poles (probably stylized trees as symbols of life and fertility) that were placed in Yahweh's temples and considered objects associated with his worship. However, it is difficult to imagine why the prophets and biblical writers were so adamantly opposed to these objects if they did not represent or symbolize the goddess of the same name. The Bible also makes it clear that in addition to Yahweh many people in Israel and Judah worshipped other gods and goddesses, sometimes as part of the official religion. So, it is likely that the clay female figurines, biblical references to Asherah or her poles in temples, and inscriptions blessing individuals by Yahweh and his Asherah are indications of how prevalent these non-monotheistic practices were.

Religious Reform in Judah (c. 721–609 BCE)

There was, though, opposition to the widespread incorporation of Canaanite elements into the worship of Yahweh. Groups that insisted that Israel should worship Yahweh alone had developed in both the North and the South, probably as minority movements led by prophets. Archaeology shows that when the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722–721 BCE, many of its people took refuge in Judah, doubling the southern kingdom's population. Many biblical scholars argue that some of these refugees brought writings and traditions that Judean editors merged with their own southern accounts and lore.¹⁴ The Judean reform party, probably strengthened by the addition of some of its counterparts from the north, blamed the destruction of Israel primarily on that kingdom's religious practices, especially its worship of other deities in addition to Yahweh. As Jan Assmann notes (2008: 83–84), these reformers transferred an aspect of worldly politics into the sphere of religion. Just as Near Eastern vassal treaties require that a vassal give exclusive allegiance to his political overlord, the “core of the prophetic and later Deuteronomic movements is not so much concerned with the unity of God as

it is with the exclusion of other gods as false or forbidden.”¹⁵

The reform movement gained royal support when the death of the Assyrian king Tiglathpileser III (727 BCE) and the admonitions of the prophet Isaiah probably influenced the new Judean King Hezekiah (c. 727–697 BCE)¹⁶ to initiate a series of reforms. He tried to centralize worship in Jerusalem. To this end, he destroyed many of the high places where Yahweh had been worshipped in Canaanite fashion, pulling down their standing stones or pillars and cutting down Asherah’s sacred poles or trees. He also purified the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, smashing the bronze serpent supposedly made by Moses. At Beersheba, a large horned altar upon which animal sacrifices had been burned was demolished, perhaps by Hezekiah’s agents. Archaeologists found its sandstone blocks, one of which had the figure of a snake carved into it, reused in a later limestone wall. This altar and that in a small temple at Arad (probably destroyed by Josiah) show that until late in the Judean monarchy, religious rituals, including animal sacrifices, were conducted in places other than Jerusalem.

To avoid suffering the fate that befell Samaria and the rest of Israel, Judah had been forced to continue its submission to Assyria. However, when Sargon II died in 705 BCE Hezekiah saw his opportunity to throw off the Assyrian yoke. The prophet Isaiah argued against revolt and urged Hezekiah to put his trust in Yahweh and not in an alliance with Egypt, which he characterized as a “broken reed.” However, encouraged by Babylonian rebels and a pharaoh of the new Nubian dynasty in Egypt, Hezekiah joined several neighboring states in refusing to pay tribute to Assyria. As we have seen in [Chapter 11](#), the new Assyrian king Sennacherib was unable to move immediately against the western rebels because of Merodach-baladan’s seizure of Babylon. In 701 BCE, though, Sennacherib launched a major assault against the rebellious Levantine states. After crushing the Phoenician and Philistine rebels and defeating an Egyptian army at Eltekeh, he invaded Judah from the west. He captured the heavily fortified city of Lachish (see [Figure 11.2](#) in [Chapter 11](#)) and laid siege to Jerusalem, boasting that he imprisoned the Judean king “like a bird in a cage.” Hezekiah had improved Jerusalem’s defenses (archaeologists have excavated the water tunnel he dug and some of his fortifications there) and initially he was able to hold out. However, in the end, he realized the futility of continuing his resistance. So, he offered to surrender and pledged his future loyalty to Assyria. Sennacherib decided to accept Hezekiah’s capitulation, but he punished the Judean king by giving some of Judah’s territory to the Philistines and making Hezekiah pay a huge indemnity.

On the other hand, Judean legends about this event credited Jerusalem’s escape from destruction to a dramatic miraculous act of God (2 Kings 18:17–19:37 = Isaiah 36–37). There are problems with the biblical account, though,

especially the reference to Taharqa (Tirhaka in the Bible) as the Egyptian pharaoh who tried to aid Hezekiah but was defeated at Eltekeh. Taharqa, a member of Dynasty 25 from Nubia (Kush), became pharaoh in 690 BCE, more than a decade after Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem. Moreover, even if the title "king" in 2 Kings 19 is regarded as an anachronism, he may have been too young in 701 BCE to lead a military campaign against Assyria. He was younger than twenty years old when his brother, the pharaoh Shebitqu (who himself only came to the throne about a year before Sennacherib's attack on Judah) summoned Taharqa north to Egypt from Nubia. These problems have led some historians to claim that 2 Kings has combined descriptions of two separate Assyrian attacks, the first in 701 BCE and the second later in Sennacherib's reign, around 688 BCE, a period for which we have no Assyrian annals (e.g., Bright 1981: 298–309; Shea 1999). However, while it is likely that two different accounts have been combined in 2 Kings (2 Kings 18:13–16 represents one, and 2 Kings 18:17–19:35 the other), most Near Eastern historians think these are variant traditions about the campaign in 701 BCE, the only one mentioned in Assyrian records (e.g., Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 223–251; Gallagher 1999).

Hezekiah probably died c. 697 BCE, only a few years after his unsuccessful rebellion against Sennacherib, leaving to his son Manasseh (c. 697 to 642 BCE) a kingdom reduced in size, impoverished, and partly depopulated by the Assyrians. Manasseh learned a lesson from his father's defeat, and (despite the suggestion of rebellion in 2 Chronicles 33:11) seems to have remained a loyal Assyrian vassal throughout his long reign, which lasted into that of Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE). He rebuilt the high places his father had destroyed, made new sacred poles for Asherah and, possibly in imitation of Mesopotamian practices, worshipped the stars and planets ("all the host of heaven," 2 Kings 21:3). The later biblical authors therefore blamed his backsliding evil ways for the eventual destruction of Judah. As P. Kyle McCarter Jr. pointed out (1999: 185), however, Manasseh's restoration of the old cultic practices probably should be characterized as "a counter-reformation, involving a wholesale rejection of the innovative religious policies of Hezekiah, which, as Manasseh probably saw it, had not succeeded in protecting Judah from Assyria."

Manasseh's son and successor, Amon, was assassinated after a brief reign (c. 642–640 BCE), leaving the throne to his eight-year-old son, Josiah (c. 640–609 BCE). Josiah was one of Judah's most important kings, for events that occurred during his reign probably marked a turning point in the development of biblical religion. In Josiah's eighteenth year on the throne, while undertaking repairs on the Temple, the high priest claimed he found a scroll called "the Book of the Law." A female prophet named Huldah verified that the book did indeed contain the words of Yahweh and Josiah then initiated a series of

reforms based on the book's demands. Almost all modern biblical scholars who use historical-critical methodology agree that this "Book of the Law" was essentially the work we know as Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the only book in the Pentateuch to use the term "Book of the Law," and Josiah's reforms correspond closely to Deuteronomy's requirements (which sometimes differ from those in other parts of the Pentateuch). Contrary to the common belief that Moses wrote Deuteronomy, most of these biblical scholars argue that this work probably was written by a Levite a generation or two before it was found in order to champion reforms like those of Hezekiah and to condemn the cultic practices from earlier times that were reinstated by Manasseh (e.g., Weinfeld 1992; Friedman 1997). Like the "instructions" earlier Egyptian wisdom teachers had produced for their pharaohs, Deuteronomy presents itself as a "testament" from Moses providing rules to guide future actions, especially those of kings. It stresses the supposed genetic cohesiveness of the Israelite tribes and their supposed common history in an Exodus from Egypt. Its laws support this Israelite ethnic identity by opposing all things Canaanite or foreign, especially in religion (Crouch 2014). Deuteronomy emphasizes that the Israelites were Yahweh's chosen people and that there was a covenant (or agreement) between Yahweh and his people in which they pledged that they would not worship any god but Yahweh.

Following the commands of the Book of the Law, Josiah centralized all worship in the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem from which he eliminated Canaanite cult objects and foreign idols.¹⁷ Throughout Judah he once again destroyed high places, both those Manasseh had rebuilt and those (probably including a temple at Arad) that somehow had survived Hezekiah's reform. He also slaughtered the priests who had officiated at the high places and eliminated all mediums and magicians. Moreover, Josiah extended his reforms into areas that once had been part of the Kingdom of Israel. As we have seen (Chapter 11), when Ashurbanipal died in 627 BCE, civil war broke out in Assyria and Babylonia. This turmoil allowed Josiah, then in his early twenties, to seize some of the northern territory that had been turned into Assyrian provinces. Thus, he was able to purge pluralistic Yahwism and foreign worship practices from much of the north as well as from Judah. It has been noted, though, that these reforms in Judah and the former Israelite territory probably had political and economic as well as religious motivation. Josiah's centralization program concentrated power in Jerusalem and aided his desire to recreate the kingdom of David. By eliminating the small shrines scattered throughout the country, he also was able to obtain the dues and offerings that previously had supported these high places and the Levites who had officiated at them.

Most historical-critical biblical scholars assert that one of Josiah's

contemporaries was so inspired by the ideals of the book of Deuteronomy and by Josiah's reforms that he made them the standard for judging the past. He compiled many older traditions and accounts into a long history of Israel and Judah that these scholars call the Deuteronomistic History. This exceptional work of biblical historiography consists of the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, plus a narrative bridge connecting the book of Deuteronomy to its beginning (McKenzie 1992; Friedman 1997). Throughout the Deuteronomistic History, rulers are judged by how well or poorly they followed the commands laid down in Deuteronomy, especially those forbidding worship of other gods and prohibiting sacrifice anywhere but in the Jerusalem Temple. Naturally, it depicts Josiah as the only truly righteous king ever to rule Judah or Israel, the greatest figure since Moses, and the initiator of a golden age.

But the Deuteronomistic historian's high hopes for the future were soon shattered. As we have seen, when Assyrian power was collapsing, Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt, intent on preventing Babylonian seizure of the Levant, marched north in 609 BCE. It is usually assumed that Josiah tried to prevent Necho from aiding the Assyrians and that the Judean army met the Egyptians in battle at Megiddo. However, Josiah does not seem to have objected when Egyptian forces passed through his territory in 616 and 610 BCE. So it has been argued that Josiah might have gone out of his fortress at Megiddo intending to support Necho's march into Syria. Presumably, problems developed only after Josiah met the pharaoh. Perhaps Necho demanded that Josiah become a vassal or cede territory such as Megiddo that controlled communications and supply lines between Syria and Egypt (McCarter 2011b: 200). Whatever the prelude, a battle or a meeting gone bad, Josiah was captured and executed by the Egyptians, undoubtedly raising questions about God's justice in the minds of many Judeans.

The Babylonian Exile and Its Effects

With Josiah's death at the hands of Pharaoh Necho, Judah was subject to Egypt. The Egyptian ruler put Eliakim, a younger son of Josiah, on the throne and renamed him Jehoiakim (c. 609–598 BCE). After Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Necho at Carchemish and Hama (605 BCE) and his campaign in Syria and Palestine (604 BCE), Jehoiakim was forced to become a Babylonian vassal. However, after Nebuchadnezzar's setback in Egypt in 601 BCE, Jehoiakim renounced his allegiance to Babylon, but died or was murdered in 598 BCE. The Babylonians invaded Judah and conquered Jerusalem in 597 BCE. They carried

off the new king, Jehoiachin, and put his uncle Zedekiah on the throne. Some of the upper classes were taken to Babylonia in captivity and many fled to Egypt for protection.

After ten years on the throne, Zedekiah, perhaps persuaded by Egypt, also decided to revolt in 587 BCE. Once again, Nebuchadnezzar and his armies invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jerusalem held out for eighteen months, but the situation within the city grew desperate. People were starving, and Lamentations 4:10 claims that some even had to resort to cannibalism to survive. Recently, archaeologists uncovered a cesspool in Jerusalem from the time just before Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the city. Analysis of pollen and seeds from the cesspool indicates that the residents were eating "backyard" plants instead of their normal diet of lentils, peas, wheat, and barley, and the presence of two types of parasites shows the people had little water for washing food or hands and not enough fuel to cook meat properly (Cline 2004: 60–61). Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and this time Nebuchadnezzar had the Temple burned and the city largely destroyed. Many more Judeans were deported, and once again others fled to Egypt. Still more people were taken away in 582 BCE after the assassination of Judah's Babylonian governor, Gedaliah, while others, including the prophet Jeremiah, went to Egypt. Despite the deportations and voluntary emigrations, it has been estimated that 70 percent of Judah's population remained in the land (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 305–306; Lipschits 2003), but the city of Jerusalem became a "ghost town" with few people living in its burned and leveled ruins.

The exiles were not treated badly in Babylonia, however (Pearce 2016). Jehoiachin and his family were kept under house arrest for more than three decades, but in 561 BCE, Amel-Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, released them. They became royal wards in Babylon and had some freedom of movement, though they were not allowed to return to Judah. Inscriptions found in Babylon describe the provisioning of the Judean royal family in Babylon at the expense of the crown. Most of the other Judean exiles were settled near Nippur as tenants on land depopulated by wars and Assyrian deportations. Cuneiform documents from Babylon and a Babylonian village called al-Yahudu (Judahville) provide a detailed picture of life for Jews under the Babylonians and Persians. They were allowed to own property and go into business, and a few seem to have become quite wealthy. Some clearly assimilated the local culture and religion, for texts show that sometimes within the same family some individuals had names referring to Babylonian gods while others had Yahwistic names (Cogan 1998: 358; Pearce 2016: 52–54). Even some members of the royal family adopted Babylonian names like Zerubbabel ("seed of Babylon") or Shenazzar ("the god Sin protects"). Aramaic, rather than

Hebrew, gradually became the common spoken language of the exiles just as it was becoming so for the Babylonians, and the Judeans adopted the Babylonian calendar.

Many of the exiles did not abandon their nationality or syncretize their religion. Instead, these Judeans experienced a kind of religious revival that produced extraordinary results. Many leading biblical scholars argue that in Babylonia during the half century following the 586 BCE destruction of Jerusalem, previously written materials were brought together, edited, and added to Deuteronomy to form the Pentateuch (or Torah). A new version of the Deuteronomistic History was retained behind Deuteronomy. This edition, possibly by the same person who wrote the original, continued Judah's story up to the Exile, which it explained as the necessary punishment for Judah's past disobedience to its covenant with Yahweh and its failure to obey his commandments. This history originally had climaxed with the reign of Josiah, but now slight changes were introduced to indicate that even Josiah had not been good enough to make up for the sins of Manasseh and some of his predecessors. Thus, during the Exile or shortly thereafter, the core of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis through 2 Kings) was put essentially into the form it has today (Anderson 1986: 427–466; Friedman 1997; Coogan 2013: 55–57, 196–198, 404–406).

The sayings of the prophets, including two who were active during the Exile, also began to be collected and edited, a process that would continue through the Persian Period. The prophet Ezekiel and the unknown exilic prophet scholars call Deutero-Isaiah provided hope to the exiles as they mourned the loss of their temple and longed for their distant homeland. Ezekiel interpreted the destruction of the nation as punishment for Judah's past sins, but he envisioned a new beginning for the people (Ezekiel 11:14–25, 36:16–37, and especially the vision of the “Valley of the Dry Bones,” 37:1–11). He also promised a new, more glorious temple and restored priests, offerings, and festivals within a rebuilt city and nation (chapters 40–48).

Conservative Jews and Christians generally believe that the prophet Isaiah who lived in the eighth-seventh centuries BCE foresaw the sixth-century BCE Babylonian Exile and spoke about it in some of his prophecies. However, most biblical scholars who use the historical-critical method argue that many prophecies in the Book of Isaiah belong to an unknown prophet active during the Exile. They point out that the style and context for the prophecies after chapter 39 are different from those of the first part of the Book of Isaiah. Also, Cyrus, the Persian monarch, is mentioned by name in Isaiah 45:1. These scholars assert that this unknown prophet's oracles were later attached to those of Isaiah (who had died about a century and a half earlier) and they now constitute chapters 40 through 55 (and probably also 33–35) of the Book of

Isaiah.¹⁸ Since his work now makes up the second part of the Book of Isaiah, scholars call this unknown prophet Deutero-Isaiah or “Second Isaiah” (e.g., Clifford 1992; Cogan 1998: 363–364; Blenkinsop 2002; Coogan 2013: 406–414). Like Ezekiel, he saw the Exile as punishment for sin, but he thought the punishment was greater than Judah’s sin merited. So, he came to view the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah and the exile of much of the population as punishment that atoned for the sins of the entire world.¹⁹ He felt God was purifying his people and soon would restore them to their homeland. But in the meantime, God was preparing his servant for a mission (Coogan 2013: 409–410). This servant is “at once a chosen individual and what all Israel is called to be and do” (Clifford 1992: 499). The servant, on one hand the prophet and on the other Israel itself (or a righteous remnant of Israel) is to be a “light to the nations” so that God’s “salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6, NRSV). This prophet thus introduced a universal element into the religion of ancient Israel (Cogan 1998: 363–364).

Many of later Judaism’s customary features such as prayer three times a day and the rules and specific dates for fasting seem to have developed during the Exile. These Jewish customs later passed into Christianity and Islam. Though there is no direct evidence for their existence until much later, synagogues also may have originated at this time as at least partial substitutes for Solomon’s Temple as places for communal meetings and prayer. Their later existence, even after the Temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt and sacrificial cultic worship resumed, indicates that synagogues continued to meet a need for people to gather together for prayer and religious study. The most likely time for the beginning of such traditions was during the Exile. Other exilic communities developed along different lines. The Judean mercenary soldiers who settled at Elephantine in Egypt (see [Figure 13.7](#)) built a temple to Yahweh some time before 525 BCE, possibly even before the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. There they seem to have performed animal sacrifices until their temple’s destruction in 410 BCE. Such sacrifice, though once undoubtedly acceptable, was by the post-exilic period anathema to the former exiles that returned to Judah from Babylonia.



Figure 13.7 Ancient Ruins on Elephantine Island, Aswan, Egypt

A group of Jews built a temple to Yahweh on this island in the sixth century BCE. It was destroyed by local Egyptian forces in 410 BCE.

Courtesy of W. Stiebing.

The most important Judean religious development of the sixth century BCE, scholars argue, was the change that occurred in the conception of Yahweh. Earlier reformers (and even the covenant stressed by Deuteronomy) had insisted only on henotheism or monolatry, the exclusive worship of Yahweh by Israel, without denying the existence of other gods. However, prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, had claimed that Yahweh used the Assyrians and Babylonians to punish Israel and Judah. So how could their gods have any power? This exaltation of Yahweh's majesty and control of history that accompanied the destruction of the Israelite kingdoms transformed what had been, at best, a kind of implicit monotheism, into explicit ethical monotheism (Lemaire 2007: 105–108). In the teachings of Deutero-Isaiah the existence of other gods is not only denied, but their worshippers are derided for believing that idols have divine power:

Those who lavish gold from the purse,
and weigh out silver in the scales—
they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god;
then they fall down and worship!...
If one cries out to it, it does not answer
or save anyone from trouble.

Thus, from the ruins of two of the smallest and weakest kingdoms of the Near East emerged the basic belief of later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that there is a single, all-powerful deity whose righteousness and justice require that individuals live upright, moral lives.

Post-Exilic Judah

The Restoration of Judah

The Neo-Babylonian Empire created by Nebuchadnezzar lasted only sixty-five years. Cyrus II of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and brought the entire ancient Near East under his control ([Chapter 12](#)). In place of the Assyrian and Babylonian use of deportations to control captive peoples, Cyrus decided to adopt a lenient policy, preserving most of the earlier governmental units of subject peoples and supporting local religious establishments. His propaganda depicted him as a righteous king chosen by the gods to oust the impious Babylonian king Nabonidus, restore order, and allow captive peoples and their gods to return to their home-lands (see [Document 12.1](#) in [Chapter 12](#)). As part of this tactic, in 538 BCE he issued a decree allowing the Judean exiles to return to Judah and ordering the rebuilding of the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. Deutero-Isaiah was so impressed by Cyrus that he hailed him (Isaiah 45:1–4) as Yahweh’s “anointed one” (messiah). As was mentioned in [Chapter 12](#), the language of this passage is reminiscent of Cyrus’s own proclamations (see [Document 12.1](#)). Thus, the “Babylonian Exile” officially came to an end, though many Judeans, especially younger ones who had grown up in Babylonia, chose not to return to their ancestral homeland.

Though Cyrus seems to have given permission for the Judean exiles to return to their homeland in 538 BCE, the actual resettlement took place in two major waves almost two decades apart. The first group to be repatriated was led by Sheshbazzar, who (despite his Babylonian name) was described as a “prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8),²⁰ commissioned by Cyrus to be governor of Judah and to rebuild the Temple of Yahweh. These people faced a difficult and disheartening task upon their return home. The city of Jerusalem was in ruins, squatters occupied property which legally belonged to those who had been in exile, finances were not yet organized, Idumaeans (Edomites) had taken control of much of the Negev, and some neighboring peoples and leaders did

not want to see a restored Judah. The conflicts between “the people of the land” (those Judeans who had not been taken off into exile) and “the sons of the Exile” (those returning from exile) were especially severe, for “the sons of the Exile” considered themselves to be the only true Yahwists. Despite the fact that “the people of the land” claimed to worship Yahweh, the returnees considered their religion impure like that of the people of Samaria, many of whom were descended from foreigners settled there by the Assyrians. So, although Sheshbazzar began rebuilding the Temple’s foundation, the work did not progress very far; most of Jerusalem remained in ruins.

In 520 BCE, Zerubbabel (probably a grandson of the former king Jehoiachin),²¹ the man Darius I appointed as the new governor of Judah, and Jeshua (Joshua), the High Priest, led another group of former exiles back to Judah from Babylonia. Encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they rebuilt the Temple’s foundation (which had never been finished or had suffered damage since the time of Sheshbazzar) and completed work on the Temple itself by 516–515 BCE. However, around that time, Zerubbabel disappeared from the record. There is no indication what, if anything, happened to him, but some think it probable that Darius removed him from office or allowed his term to expire because his Davidic lineage was reviving Judean nationalistic sentiment and hopes for a reestablishment of the monarchy (see Haggai 2:20–23). He was probably the last member of the House of David to govern Judah.

Problems continued to beset the Judeans. Though the Temple was rebuilt, large portions of Jerusalem were like a ghost town, and large sections of its walls remained in ruins until the 440s BCE. Some of Judah’s troubles were instigated by the Samaritans who lived in the area that formerly had been the Kingdom of Israel. Zerubbabel had rebuffed their offer to help rebuild the Temple, and in Bernhard Anderson’s words, “the hand extended in friendship curled into a fist” (Anderson 1986: 517). Economic and political rivalries further aggravated this religious quarrel between the peoples of Samaria and Judah.

The Careers of Ezra and Nehemiah

According to the Bible, during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465–424 BCE) two remarkable men, Ezra and Nehemiah, reorganized the religious and political affairs of Judah. The present arrangement of the biblical material indicates that Ezra arrived first (in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, 458 BCE) and Nehemiah came later (between Artaxerxes I’s twentieth and thirty-second years, 445–433 BCE with a second term sometime before Artaxerxes I’s death). Though their

times of authority in Judah supposedly overlapped, there is virtually no interaction between the two men in the biblical accounts.²² So, as we shall see, some scholars question the Bible's chronological arrangement of their careers.

Ezra was a priest and a scribe, but his decrees supposedly were backed by the Persian king and had the force of law. Persian kings often promoted harmony by restoring and supporting local religious cults and traditions, so Artaxerxes I (or possibly II) sent Ezra to Judah to stabilize the province's social and religious situation. He was given vessels for use in the temple and funds to buy sacrificial animals, drink offerings, and other materials for the cult. But the most important object he carried back to Jerusalem was a copy of a work called the *Torah* ("law" or "instruction") of Moses. He gathered the citizens of Jerusalem together and read to them from this work throughout the weeklong Feast of Tabernacles. Levites interpreted the readings (or possibly paraphrased them in Aramaic) so the people could understand them. There has been some debate about the identity of this "law." Many (perhaps most) biblical scholars have assumed that it was the Pentateuch, the Torah of the present Hebrew Scriptures, or a sizeable portion of that work. Others, though, argue that it was a smaller portion of the later Torah, possibly only Deuteronomy and some form of P, the Priestly source (Satlow 2014: 77–78). The readings were concluded with a dramatic covenant renewal ceremony in which the people supposedly pledged "to follow God's law, which was given through Moses" and "to completely obey all the commands, rules and statutes of Yahweh" (Nehemiah 10:29).

To ensure the unity of the family, the basic institution that would have to carry out these laws, and to guard against future apostasy, Ezra prohibited marriages between Jews ("sons of the Exile") and non-Jews (including "the people of the land"). He especially opposed marriages between Jewish men and non-Jewish women, demanding that all such marriages be ended by divorce (Ezra 10). Many scholars see Ezra's reforms as the real beginning of Judaism as a religion of "The Book," with the Law as the fundamental guide for Jewish life. They, therefore, regard Ezra as the father or architect of Judaism which is viewed as a distinct entity that developed out of the earlier Israelite/Judean religion (Anderson 1986: 527–530). The new strain in Judaism came at the expense of other currents within Yahwism. The book of Ezra and Nehemiah shows a process through which the "sons of exile" (with Ezra and Nehemiah at their helm) take up the mantle of Yahwism (now Judaism) over and above the older Israelite traditions practiced in Palestine, that is, the remnant Judeans and the Samaritans (Carter 2016: 233).

In English Bibles, the career of Nehemiah is described in the biblical book of Nehemiah, but in the Hebrew Scriptures this material forms the second half of the book of Ezra. The Book of Nehemiah (with the exception of chapters 8 –

10) seems to be essentially derived from a first-person narrative (called by scholars the *Memoirs of Nehemiah*), probably written by Nehemiah himself. He was a cup-bearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes I, but when he heard about the problems afflicting Judah, he persuaded the king to send him there as governor. He found himself opposed by Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and a coalition of other neighboring peoples who constantly complained about him to the Persian king, tried to undermine his authority, and threatened to attack him. Despite this opposition, soon after his arrival in Judah, Nehemiah organized the rebuilding of Jerusalem's gates and walls and repopulated the city by a lottery that selected one-tenth of Judah's population to become new residents of Jerusalem. He also instituted economic reforms concerning mortgages, loans, and interest to protect people who were losing their lands and being forced into slavery because of debt. Presumably he was a wealthy man, because he also canceled the taxes that previous governors had imposed to support themselves and their staff. In addition, he implemented some economic requirements of the biblical Law, demanding strict observance of the Sabbath and making sure that the people supported the priests and temple staff with their tithes. Finally, he enrolled citizens according to genealogy, allowing only those from families that had experienced the Exile to be considered Jews, and either instituted or enforced (depending on whether he preceded or followed Ezra) a prohibition of intermarriage. Some scholars (e.g., Miller and Hayes 1986: 528–530) consider Nehemiah's acts, especially the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, necessary prerequisites for those of Ezra. Also, Nehemiah's prohibition of intermarriage was not as severe as Ezra's, suggesting that Ezra was strengthening an earlier rule. So, some scholars have argued that Nehemiah was governor of Judah during the reign of Artaxerxes I and that Ezra was sent to Jerusalem a couple of generations later in 398 BCE, during the reign of Artaxerxes II. Others have emended the passage that claimed that Ezra arrived in the "seventh" year of Artaxerxes to "thirty-seventh" year, though no textual evidence has been found supporting the emendation. (For descriptions of the various positions see Bright 1981: 391–402; Klein 1992: 735–737; Graham 1998; Moore and Kelle 2011: 407–422; Meyers and Burt 2011: 224–228; Satlow 2014: 85–91.)

While we cannot be sure of the date for Ezra's mission, Aramaic letters found on Elephantine Island in Egypt indicate that Nehemiah's governorship belonged to the time of Artaxerxes I. These letters, part of an archive called the Elephantine Papyri, belonged to a community of Jewish mercenary soldiers serving in the garrison at Yeb (Elephantine; see [Figure 13.7](#)). As we have noted, their temple, dedicated to Yahu or Yaho (Yahweh), was destroyed in 410

BCE by Egyptian priests supported by the local garrison commander. The Jewish community wrote to Bagoas, the governor of Judah, and to the High

Priest Jehohanan (Johanan), urging them to support their petition to rebuild the Temple. Then, when they received no answer, they wrote again in 407 BCE to Bagoas and sent a copy to the sons of Sanballat (Nehemiah's adversary), the former governor of Samaria (see [Document 13.2](#)). Thus, Nehemiah and Sanballat must have served as governors a generation earlier, during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465 to 424 BCE).

Document 13.2 Elephantine Papyri Concerning the Egyptian Temple of Yaho (Yahweh)

This is a translation of the Elephantine Jewish community's "file copy" of the second letter (407 BCE) sent to Jerusalem to obtain support for rebuilding the Elephantine temple of Yaho (Yahweh). It includes a memorandum of an oral response given to the person carrying the letter. Interestingly, the memorandum indicates that Bagoas and Delaiah, son of Sanballat, probably unwilling to commit themselves in writing, orally authorized the temple's reconstruction (but called it only a "house of offering") and did not specifically give permission for performing animal sacrifices there. The letter below, though, makes it clear that animal sacrifice *had* been practiced at the temple before its destruction (translation by H. L. Ginsberg 1955; W. Stiebing added the explanatory material in square brackets). The evidence from Elephantine reminds us that Jewish life continued and thrived outside of the Persian province of Yehud (Judah), despite the spiritual revival in Jerusalem and the construction of the Second Temple.

To our lord Bagoas, governor of Judah, your servants Yedoniah and his colleagues, the priests who are in the fortress of Elephantine. May the God of Heaven seek after the welfare of our lord at all times and give you favor before King Darius [II] and the nobles a thousand times more than now. May you be happy and healthy at all times. Now, your servant Yedoniah and his colleagues depose as follows: In the month of Tammuz in the 14th year of King Darius [= 410 BCE], when Arsames departed and went to the king, the priests of the god Khnub [Khnum], who is in the fortress of Elephantine, conspired with Vidaranag, who was commander-in-chief here, to wipe out the temple of the god Yaho from the fortress of Elephantine. So that wretch Vida-ranag sent to his son Nefayan, who was in command of the garrison of the fortress of Syene [Aswan], this order, "The temple of the god Yaho in the fortress of Yeb is to be destroyed." Nefayan thereupon led the Egyptians with the other troops. Coming with their weapons to the fortress of Elephantine, they entered that temple and razed it to the ground.... Now, our forefathers built this temple back in the days of the kingdom of Egypt, and when Cambyses came to Egypt he found it built. They [Cambyses and the Persians] knocked down all the temples of the gods of Egypt, but no one did any damage to this temple.... We have also sent a letter before

now, when this evil was done to us, (to) our lord and to the high priest Johanan and his colleagues the priests in Jerusalem and to Ostanes the brother of Anani and the nobles of the Jews. Never a letter have they sent to us.... From then to now, in the year 17 of King Darius, no meal-offering, incense, nor burnt offering have been offered in this temple. Now your servants Yedoniah, and his colleagues, and the Jews, the citizens of Elephantine, all say thus: If it please our lord, take thought of this temple to rebuild it, since they do not let us rebuild it. Look to your well-wishers and friends here in Egypt. Let a letter be sent from you to them concerning the temple of the god Yaho to build it in the fortress of Elephantine as it was built before; and the meal-offering, incense, and burnt offering will be offered in your name, and we shall pray for you at all times, we, and our wives, and our children, and the Jews that are here, all of them, if you do thus, so that that temple is rebuilt.... We have also set the whole matter forth in a letter in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria.

Other Post-Exilic Religious Developments in Judah

A major effect of the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms was the exclusivism they introduced by forbidding marriages between Jews and non-Jews. The book of Jonah seems to have been written to protest the post-exilic narrow vision of Judaism's scope and mission. This often-humorous work contains many folk-story elements²³ and is set at the time of a well-known prophet of Israel named Jonah ben Amittay at the height of the Assyrian Empire (2 Kings 14:25). However, the book's statement that Nineveh *was* a very large city and the exaggeration of its size suggests that the work was created after Nineveh's destruction in 612 BCE. Moreover, there is some evidence of Aramaic influence in the Hebrew in which Jonah is written, suggesting a post-exilic date for its composition (Sasson 1990: 20–28; Magonet 1992: 940–941). The Book of Jonah seems to be a humorous post-exilic parable using the earlier historical prophet as its main character (Matthews and Moyer 2012: 215–219).

The author has God call a prophet named Jonah to go preach in Nineveh, capital of Assyria. At first Jonah refuses and tries to flee, but then he is thrown overboard in a storm and swallowed by a huge fish. After Jonah turns to God, the monster vomits him up on shore and he journeys to Nineveh where he preaches God's words against the city. When the city repents and God forgives them, Jonah becomes furious. At the end, God has to teach him that the divine creator of the world has a right to be concerned about the welfare of all people, including non-Jews and even Judah's enemies (Jonah 4:10–11). The Book of Ruth, which presents a meaningful process of conversion for foreign women, may also have been written at this time. Like the book of Jonah, Ruth provides

a dissenting view to Ezra-Nehemiah's anti-intermarriage stance (Eskenazi 2016: 483). Several other books appear to have been written during the Persian Period (such as Chronicles, Esther, Song of Songs, and probably Job) as the Jewish communities grappled with the questions of how to restructure their life in the aftermath of the Babylonian destruction and Exile (Eskenazi 2016: 479).

Persian religion also probably influenced Jewish eschatology (beliefs about the Final Things) during this time. Earlier prophets such as Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah had promised that a new "golden" age would dawn in the future when Israel and Judah recommitted themselves to Yahweh or returned to Palestine after the Exile. These ideas seem to have been supplemented and expanded during the Persian Period (c. 539–330 BCE) probably under the influence of Mazda worshippers.

Some Jews adopted Zoroaster's solution to the problem of evil in a world created by a good God (see [Chapter 12](#)). They decided that a rebellious angel had become God's enemy and, like Angra Mainu in Mazdian (or Zoroastrian) religion, was responsible for all the evil and injustice in the universe. Accompanying this belief was the idea that God had a multitude of angels to do his bidding while the Evil One commanded hordes of demons. The concept of the messiah, God's anointed king, also began to change as hopes for a restoration of the Judean monarchy under Zerubbabel or another member of the line of David faded. The belief arose that the Messiah would lead God's angelic legions against the demonic forces and destroy them in a great battle at the End Time. Then there would be a resurrection of the dead and a final judgment after which evildoers would be either destroyed or forever punished in hell while the righteous would enjoy the glories of eternal life in God's everlasting kingdom.

These ideas appear in Jewish writings for the first time around 167–166 BCE during the Hellenistic Age, but they must have been incubating for some time during the Persian Period in Jewish communities that were in close contact with Mazda worshippers. It probably took a few centuries for these ideas to gain wider acceptance among traditionally minded Jews. Some, like the author of Ecclesiastes, probably written around 200 BCE (Crenshaw 1992a: 274–275), declared the ways of God unknowable and abandoned belief in God's direct involvement in human affairs. Others, especially during the persecution of their faith by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV between 168 and 165 BCE, took solace in the Persian-inspired eschatological beliefs expressed in the biblical book of Daniel, almost certainly written during those dark days of oppression (Collins 1992: 30–31; Nielsen 1998; Coogan 2013: 531–538). Daniel's author was convinced that though the righteous may not always receive justice in *this* world, God would reward them in a glorious afterlife. Following the success of

the revolt against the Seleucids, what probably had been a minority view through the latter part of the Persian Period and the early part of the Hellenistic Age became the dominant view within Judaism. And it was this eschatological Judaism that gave birth to Christianity and developed into early Rabbinical Judaism, both of which later strongly influenced Islam. Thus, the historical effects of the developments described here are incalculable.

Notes

1. For a brief summary of the problems in the biblical texts and the methods and results of literary and historical criticism (especially in the Pentateuch) see (Stiebing 1989: 20–24; Friedman 1992, 1997, 2003; Van Seters 1998; Baden 2012; Coogan 2013: 49–58). Opposition to the “Documentary Hypothesis” of Pentateuchal origins and support for traditional beliefs can be found in (Archer 2007; Hill and Walton 2009).
2. See, for example, Anderson (1986: 151–180) and Friedman (1997). In a more recent work (1998), Richard Elliott Friedman argues that the Court History of David was actually part of *J* rather than a separate work written at about the same time. He dates this enlarged *J* to the latter part of the ninth century BCE, rather than to the time of Solomon or soon afterward (i.e., mid- or late tenth century BCE).
3. For a summary of the many problems connected with the Exodus narratives (including dating the event) and an analysis of some of the suggested solutions (see e.g., Stiebing 1989; Sarna and Shanks 2011). For support of many aspects of the biblical version of the Exodus, see Hoffmeier (1998) and Millard (2000).
4. The Bible derives “Moses” (*Mosheh* in Hebrew) from *mashah* (“to draw [water]”). However, *mosheh* would mean “drawer (of/from water),” not “drawn (from water).” The attempt to give the name a Hebrew etymology is also forced in that the story has an Egyptian princess give a supposedly Hebrew name to a child she finds.
5. This is a very different conclusion from the one William Stiebing accepted in Stiebing (1989). It is primarily Rainey’s linguistic arguments that have convinced him to alter his previous view.
6. In his most recent assessment of the chronology debate, Amihai Mazar (2014) has advocated a middle position. He now believes that the criteria for dating the tenth century BCE could also apply to the first half of the ninth century BCE. Thus, the best we can do is talk about an early Israelite period rather than a United Monarchy attributable to David and Solomon.
7. The construction techniques and the pottery from Omri’s palace are one of the lynchpins in Finkelstein’s Low Chronology. He dates all of the northern centers to Omri’s rule (ninth century BCE), arguing that it is only under Omri that Israel became a state (Finkelstein 1996).
8. As noted earlier, Richard Elliott Friedman (1998) argues that the *J* work continues through Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel into 1 Kings. Some scholars, though, date *J* to the sixth century and argue that it was written to form a prelude to Deuteronomy (the earliest

Pentateuchal source according to these scholars, for example Van Seters 1998: 5–49).

9. Though traditionally the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21) are credited to the time of Moses, most critical scholars date their present formulation to the monarchic period or later. The earlier of the two versions (Exodus 20:1–17) seems to have been inserted into the Exodus narrative since it interrupts the flow of the theophany account—Exodus 20:18 resumes the story where Exodus 19:25 left off. However, the Yahwist writer, probably the creator of the earliest prose narrative now included in the Pentateuch, already expresses the henotheistic view found in the first commandment (see Exodus 34:13–17). This author, probably writing around 800 BCE, seems to have been inspired by the ideas of the early prophets.
10. An announcement of the recent finds at Khirbet Qeiyafa can be viewed at www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/breaking-news%E2%80%94evidence-of-cultic-activity-in-judah-discovered-at-khirbetqeiyafa/?mqsc=E3157595.
11. Three members of Saul's family had Ba'al names (with Ba'al almost certainly referring to Yahweh). One of his sons was named Eshba'al ("Ba'al Lives" or "Ba'al Gives"), a grandson was named Meriba'al (meaning uncertain), and another family member was named Mephiba'al ("From the Mouth of Ba'al") as indicated in 1 Chronicles 8:33–34. However, a later editor of 2 Samuel changed these names to Ishbosheth ("Man of Shame") and Mephibosheth ("From the Mouth of Shame," for both Meriba'al and Mephiba'al), though the original name Mephiba'al was preserved in a couple of ancient translations of 2 Samuel.
12. Three earlier shrines (c. 1000 BCE), one of which had columns and lions (Asherah's symbols) flanking the doorway, were recently found at Khirbet Qeiyafa, but no human images or statuettes were uncovered there. For pictures, see www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/breaking-news%E2%80%94evidence-of-cultic-activity-in-judah-discovered-at-khirbetqeiyafa/?mqsc=E3157595.
13. The five biblical passages in question are 1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 21:3 and 7; and 2 Kings 23:4 and 7. However, André Lemaire (2007: 61) has argued that because the text of 1 Kings 18:19 uses the term *ha'asherah* ("the asherah"), it also refers to a wooden cult object that stood in Yahweh's temples rather than to the goddess Asherah. Lemaire does not explain, however, why a cult object would have its own prophets.
14. Some scholars think that this is when the Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) accounts of Israel's early history were combined into one narrative (e.g., Friedman 1997).
15. As mentioned above, Deuteronomy 6:4 does not claim that "Yahweh (or the LORD) is One," but rather that "Yahweh is our god, Yahweh alone." See also Herbert B. Huffmon 2012.
16. The Bible provides two contradictory synchronisms with Assyrian chronology for the reign of Hezekiah. 2 Kings 18:9 says that the siege of Samaria (724–722 BCE) began in Hezekiah's fourth year, indicating that he came to the throne in 727 BCE. However, 2 Kings 18:13 states that Sennacherib's 701 BCE invasion of Judah occurred in Hezekiah's fourteenth year, placing the start of his reign in 714 BCE. Those who accept the theory that Sennacherib invaded Judah twice support the second of these dates, so that Hezekiah would still have been on the throne in 688 BCE.
17. The Bible contains two different versions of the course of Josiah's reforms. 2 Chronicles 34:3–5 claims that he began a series of cultic reforms in his twelfth regnal year and then initiated an even greater reform in his eighteenth year after finding the Book of the Law. 2

- Kings 22–23 mentions only the reforms begun in Josiah’s eighteenth year. Most historians have accepted the version in Kings as the more historical account as we have here.
18. Recently, a computer program designed to detect differences in authorship by analyzing vocabulary and style has indicated that Deutero-Isaiah’s work includes chapters 33–35 of the book of Isaiah instead of beginning with chapter 40 as had been thought previously. Chapters 56–66 of the Book of Isaiah are by yet another author (or authors) belonging to the post-Exilic period and are often designated “Third Isaiah.”
 19. See especially the “Servant Songs”: Isaiah 42:18–25, 44:21–28, 49:1–13, 50:4–11, 52:13–53:12. Christians later interpreted many of these passages as prophecies concerning the mission of Jesus.
 20. It was once thought that Sheshbazzar was identical with Shenazzar, a descendant of Jehoiachin, mentioned in 1 Chronicles 3:18, but that identification has been challenged on linguistic grounds and is now rejected by most scholars. In Hebrew, the word translated “prince” can mean “leader,” and does not necessarily refer to a member of the Davidic line.
 21. In the books of Ezra (3:2, 8; 5:2), Nehemiah (12:1), and Haggai (1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 23), Zerubbabel is designated the son of Shealtiel, while 1 Chronicles 3:19 states that Pedaiah was his father. However they solve this discrepancy, most scholars have been willing to accept the premise that Zerubbabel was of Davidic lineage (e.g., Beyer 1992: 1085). On the other hand, a few argue that he probably was not of the royal line and that the two different genealogies were created to give him Davidic lineage and connect him directly with pre-exilic Judah. For this view, see Miller and Hayes (1986: 456).
 22. The two men are mentioned together only at the time of the reading of the Law (Nehemiah 8:9) and the dedication of the walls (Nehemiah 12:31–36), and both references may be editorial insertions by the author who created the book or by a later redactor.
 23. The folk-story or fairy tale elements include a huge fish large enough to swallow Jonah whole, the fact that Jonah stays alive in the belly of this creature for three days, the description of Nineveh as a city so large that it took three days to walk across it, a plant that in a single day can grow tall enough to shade Jonah’s head, and (perhaps the most fantastic miraculous element in the book) the fact that the people of Nineveh repent after Jonah had been preaching for only one day.

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Afterword

The Legacy of the Ancient Near East

In recent decades many physical remnants of the ancient Near Eastern cultures have been damaged or destroyed. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, civil wars and revolutions in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Libya, and the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians have not only ended archaeological exploration in some areas, but also have led to the loss of many ancient remains. Major archaeological museums in Baghdad and Cairo have been looted and though some artifacts have been recovered, many remain missing. Illicit excavations by individuals looking for artifacts to sell on the black market have done severe damage at some archaeological sites. And even more troubling has been the willful destruction of “infidel” structures and artifacts by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. As these attacks continue, it is important to remember how much the world owes to the ancient Near East and how much of our own heritage is lost with the destruction and desecration of the Near Eastern heritage.

The Near East was the birthplace of the world’s earliest civilizations, and through military campaigns and trade its accomplishments spread to other areas, both east and west. Peoples of other regions quickly borrowed not only basic discoveries such as agriculture, domestication of animals, and metallurgy, but also aspects of Near Eastern writing systems, art, architecture, literature, mathematics, religion, warfare, transportation, and other cultural features. Many of these influences continue to be important today, having been passed on by later peoples such as the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and others (Halla 1996).

Food, Drink, and Animals

Though the discovery of agriculture and domestication of animals also occurred in eastern Asia and the Americas, the Near Eastern agricultural revolution produced most of the domesticated crops and animals still used in the West today. The basic varieties of wheat, barley, peas, and lentils, as well as

many nuts (such as almonds, pistachios, acorns, and walnuts) and fruits and berries (including grapes, apples, apricots, dates, lemons, figs, pomegranates, mulberries, and juniper berries) had been domesticated in the Near East by c. 6000 BCE. Ancient Near Easterners developed many of the food products made from these plants, especially bread, cakes, raisins, soups, and porridges. The Near East also passed to the West crops such as rice and cotton, which originally were domesticated in India or points further east.

Two of the most important food products made from domesticated plants were intoxicating beverages—beer and wine. The discovery of fermentation probably happened accidentally from observation of food stored in damp conditions that fostered this process. Nevertheless, from very early times people were using grain to produce beer and grapes and dates to make wine (Katz and Voigt 1986; McGovern 2003; Homan 2004). Because of residues left in the bottom of the jars during the fermentation process, ancient Near Eastern beers and wines were strained before being drunk or (in the case of beer) drunk with a straw. Ancient Egyptians labeled wine jars with the source and date of the vintage, just as today.

Ancient Near Eastern peoples also first domesticated the animals most commonly used in the West. These domesticated animals include our primary pets—cats and dogs—food animals such as cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, ducks, and geese, and working animals such as donkeys, mules, and oxen. Early Near Eastern farmers and herders derived milk and eggs from their domesticated animals and learned to make cheese, butter, and yogurt from cow, sheep, and goat milk. Moreover, they domesticated bees to produce honey for sweetening beverages (including some types of beer), cakes, and other products.

Mathematics and Science

Some of the most crucial contributions of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations were in the area of mathematics and science, including technology and engineering. The contributions of ancient Greece in these fields are usually recognized, but Greek mathematics and science were based on elements borrowed from the Near East, especially Mesopotamia (Van der Waerden 1961; Neugebauer 1962, 1975; Rochberg 2010). As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), the Mesopotamians used a mathematical system based on 60, so they divided the day into 12 “double hours” of equal length (60 “double minutes” each). In the Hellenistic Period (the era after Alexander the Great’s death), Greek astronomers borrowed the idea of dividing the day and night into hours of

equal length, but instead of 12 “double hours,” they used 24 “single” hours of 60 “single” minutes each. Mesopotamians also divided circles into 360 degrees, another element borrowed by the Greeks. We still use these divisions, even though our mathematical system is a decimal system, based on 10 rather than 60.

Mesopotamian mathematicians knew the principle of the Pythagorean theorem a millennium before Pythagoras, and they could solve the problems of Euclidian geometry more than a thousand years before Euclid. They did not, however, devise abstract theorems the way the Greeks did. On the other hand, as mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), they created tables of square roots, cube roots, reciprocals, and cubic equations, as well as more common multiplication and division tables. The most important aspect of Mesopotamian mathematics was the fact that, unlike Greek and Roman numerical systems, it utilized a place notational system. In Roman numerals, placing the sign for 1 before the sign for 10 (IX) indicated “9” ($10 - 1$), and 1 after a 10 (XI) equals “11” ($10 + 1$). It is very difficult to multiply and divide with such a system, especially when the numbers are large. In the Mesopotamian system, the sign for 1 and for 60 are the same, so a 1 before a 10 would be 70, not 9 ($[1 \times] 60 + 10 = 70$). The signs for 2, 4, and 9, written in that sequence, could not be read as a single number in the Roman system (II IV IX)—it would not make sense. In the Mesopotamian system, though, the signs 2, 4, 9 would stand for $(2 \times 60) + (4 \times 60) + 9 = 7,449$. This system seems to have been taken to India during the Persian Period, and the Indians converted it to a base-10 system and added the sign for zero. Because of their place notational system, Mesopotamians were able to solve many complex algebraic equations, and this aspect of mathematics seems to have been taken east as well. The Arabs later borrowed the Indian notational system, further developed algebra (to which they gave its name, *al-jabr*, “reunification of broken parts”), and passed both on to the West along with Arabic numerals. We are still using them today.

Mesopotamian mathematical astronomy and horoscopic astrology have also had a great impact on Western thought. Babylonians were keeping astronomical records of the movements of heavenly bodies before 1600 BCE, and by Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times they were predicting solar and lunar eclipses. They used a lunar calendar with alternating months of twenty-nine and thirty days, making the year only 354 days long. In early times, though, they recognized that the solar year was some eleven days longer, so once every three years or so they added an extra month to keep their lunar year somewhat synchronized with the solar year. As we saw in [Chapter 12](#), by the fifth century BCE, Babylonian astronomers had created a calendar that required adding an extra lunar month sometimes after three years and other times after two years, so that seven months were added every nineteen years.

This extremely accurate Mesopotamian lunar calendar was borrowed by the Jews during the Exile and is still the basis for both the Jewish and Christian religious calendars.

At the same time, Egyptians were creating a 365-day solar-year civil calendar. During the Hellenistic Age, Greek scholars in Alexandria, using astronomical data developed in Baby-lonia, recognized that the solar year was just slightly less than 365 $\frac{1}{4}$ days long. So, they added a leap year to the Egyptian calendar, making every fourth year 366 days long. This calendar was introduced into Rome by Julius Caesar in 45 BCE, and was used in the West for many centuries. However, because the solar year is actually 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 42 seconds long instead of the 365 days and 6 hours of the Julian calendar, adding an extra day every four years over centuries got the calendrical date ahead of the solar year. Astronomers for Pope Gregory XIII solved this problem by dropping ten days in 1582 CE and then decreeing that years ending in hundreds be leap years only if divisible by 400. This Gregorian calendar is the calendar we use today.

Mesopotamian astronomy arose out of the need to understand celestial omens relating to the future of the country or king, so it was always bound up with astrology. Babylonians eventually created the astrological zodiac with its twelve divisions, and by Persian times, they were using the signs of the zodiac and the positions of certain stars at birth to chart horoscopes for individuals. The Magi, members of the Median priestly class who became Mazdian priests, learned astronomy and astrology from the Babylonians and became very proficient in these subjects during the Achaemenid Persian Empire. After the Macedonian conquest of the Near East, Hellenistic Greek scholars grew to respect the expertise of the Magi and from them learned Mesopotamian astronomy and astrology. The Greeks continued to advance both these fields and passed them on to the West. They also borrowed the words *magos* (singular) and *magoi* (plural), using them to refer to astronomers or astrologers in particular, or to very wise or learned men in general. Thus, the Gospel of Matthew refers to *magoi* (or Magi, using the Latinized spelling), individuals in the East (Mesopotamia or Persia?) who see a new star at Jesus's birth and recognize its significance. Our words "magic" and "magician" also derive from the Greek use of *magos/magoi*.

Near Eastern technology and engineering were also influential. Plows and other agricultural implements were first developed in the Near East, as was the wheel. Techniques for throwing pottery on a potter's wheel and firing it in a kiln, producing bronze (and later iron) artifacts, and making and dyeing wool cloth were also Near Eastern discoveries. This technology quickly spread throughout the Mediterranean world. People in neighboring regions also learned the surveying and engineering skills necessary for constructing roads

and creating elaborate irrigation systems from Near Eastern societies. Other techniques for producing glass, perfumes, and special dyes were more closely guarded, so their influence outside the region where they were created is difficult to determine. We do know, however, that Near Easterners were among the first to domesticate camels and to show their effectiveness on trade routes through arid regions (Bulliet 1975). The use of camels would spread to other areas, reducing the barriers presented by large deserts. Near Eastern cultures also produced the first accounting systems, censuses, and postal systems, which would prove to be essential for later trade, government, and personal communication.

One often-ignored Near Eastern export is military techniques and equipment. The Near East was the site of the first use of horse-mounted and camel-mounted cavalry. This military component as well as the armament, training, and tactics of the Assyrian infantry were borrowed by peoples in Asia Minor who passed them on to the Greeks. There, these elements were used to create the Greek hoplite armies that played a significant role in overthrowing aristocracies and replacing them with tyrants within Ionia and Greece. Tyrannies, in turn, eventually gave way to oligarchies and, in some instances, democracies.

The engineering and building achievements of the Egyptians and Babylonians amazed and inspired the Greeks and Romans. Many ancient writers considered the great walls of Babylon and the “Hanging Gardens” wonders of the world. In addition, the Pyramids of Giza were on *all* the Greco-Roman lists of wonders of the ancient world. These huge walls, buildings, and stone structures, as well as the monumental temples at Thebes in Egypt, spurred other ancient cultures to strive to emulate Near Eastern greatness when constructing their own buildings and monuments.

Language and Literature

Modern Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian are living descendants of ancient Near Eastern languages. Some Jewish and Christian groups in parts of Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran still speak varieties of Aramaic, and some communities still use Aramaic and Coptic (a derivative of ancient Egyptian) for religious rites. Other languages, including Sumerian, Akkadian, Elamite, Hittite, and Hurrian, died out in antiquity and had to be rediscovered in modern times. Nevertheless, the impact of Near Eastern thought and culture on the West can be gauged in part by the numerous words from these early cultures that have

been passed down into our modern speech. The derivation of “magic” and related words from the Iranian Magi has already been mentioned. Our word “abyss” comes from Greek *abussos*, which derives from *absu* (or *abzu* or *apsu*), the Sumerian and Akkadian term for the “Deep,” the waters on which the earth floats. In addition, as one might suspect, many current names for places and geographical features in the Near East are derived from their Near Eastern originals, usually through Greek versions of the earlier names. For example, “Tigris” comes from the Greek version of Sumerian *Idigna* and “Euphrates” from the Greek attempt to represent the Akkadian *Purattu*, which, in turn, goes back to Sumerian *Buranun*. Other words were borrowed along with the objects or materials they represented: adobe (from the Spanish for “mud-brick” through Arabic *at-tub* from Akkadian *tub* and Sumerian *dub*); ebony (through Greek *ebenos* from Egyptian *hebni*); jasper (through Greek *iaspis* from Akkadian *yashpu*); myrrh (through Greek *murra* from *murru*, a word common to most Semitic languages); naphtha (through *naphthos*, a Greek word for petroleum from Persian *naft* from, in turn, Akkadian *naptu*); natron (through Greek *nitron* from Egyptian *netri*); saffron (through Arabic *za‘faran*, probably from Sumerian and Akkadian *azupiranu*). This list is only a sample of the many words (and products) we have borrowed from the ancient Near Eastern cultures (see, e.g., Cannon and Kaye 2002).

Naturally, the literature produced in these ancient languages has had considerably more impact than the languages themselves. In Egypt and Mesopotamia, for the first time people explored the themes of love and loss and the meaning of life in writing. The first jokes, bar songs, love poetry, ethical teachings, and law codes have survived, and many show marked similarities with works in the Hebrew Bible. Examples include the Law Code of Hammurabi (see [Chapter 5](#)), parts of which are included in Biblical law, and the Mesopotamian flood story, which is echoed in the story of Noah and the Flood in Genesis.

The Bible, of course, stands head and shoulders above other ancient works in terms of its influence on later cultures, even when its religious importance is ignored and it is considered only as a literary work. Some knowledge of the Bible is necessary for proper appreciation of many works of Western literature because these works make frequent allusions to its phrases or stories.

Not only the Bible, but western Greek culture also borrowed from Mesopotamian literary traditions. The Mesopotamian tradition probably lies behind ancient Greek traditions about a worldwide flood survived only by Prometheus’s son Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha. The accounts of Gilgamesh’s exploits in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, passed on to Hittites and others, probably influenced Greek traditions about Heracles (Hercules). Mesopotamian accounts of the origins of the gods, filtered through Hurrian

and Hittite versions, also probably influenced the Greek poet Hesiod's *Theogony* (written c. 700 BCE).

Finally, and probably most importantly, the West owes to the ancient Near East the element that makes all literature possible—writing. Mesopotamians and Egyptians were the earliest peoples to create a writing system, and even the alphabet used in most Western countries ultimately derives from the ancient Near East. We use the Latin alphabet today, which was borrowed from the Etruscans, who got it from the Greeks. Also, the Greek alphabet is the direct source of the modern Cyrillic alphabets of Eastern Europe. The Greeks got their alphabet from the Phoenicians, who received it from their Canaanite ancestors, who seem to have based it on selected Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Music, Art, and Architecture

We have few details about ancient music, but what we do know indicates that the roots of Greek and other Western scales and music theory were fed from the ancient Near East (Mitchell 1974; Dunbrill 2005). The reconstructed harps and lyres from the “royal tombs” of Ur and representations of similar instruments in art seem to indicate that even in Early Dynastic Sumer (c. 2900–2300 BCE), seven-tone and eight-tone scales were known. The modern major scale was known by at least the Old Babylonian Period (c. 2000–1600 BCE) and probably earlier. Two Mesopotamian tablets provide the names for the lyre strings and numbers for the intervals between them. Thus, the mathematical relationships between the notes of the scale were already recognized in the Near East before 500 BCE. It is now clear that Pythagoras was speaking nothing but the plain truth when he claimed that he learned his mathematics and music (as well as the relationship between them) in the Near East. Two other tablets give instructions for tuning stringed instruments and the names of seven different tunings or scales. So it is probable that even the various Greek scales or modes had already developed in the Near East before taking root in Greece. Moreover, a c. 1400 BCE tablet found at Ugarit has proved to be a piece of “sheet music” recording the melody, harmony, and words of a Hurrian cult song (Shanks (ed.) 1980). Before this discovery, it was thought that the practice of noting both the tone for the melody and one for the harmonic accompaniment arose only during the Middle Ages.

Greek art and architecture, major influences on later Western cultures, borrowed many elements from the Near East. The Ionic style capital for columns was derived from “Proto-Aeolic” capitals used in Palestine and Syria

around 900 BCE. The derivation of Greek fluting (the grooves cut into the sides of columns) from Mesopotamian or Egyptian bundles of reeds used in early buildings, however, is questionable. The Greek Corinthian “orientalizing” style of pottery (c. 750–650 BCE) used motifs borrowed from Asia Minor, Syria, Phoenicia, Urartu, and Mesopotamia. At the same time, Greek statues were being modeled on those of Egypt. The Archaic Greek depictions of young men stand rigidly, one leg stepping forward, arms straight down at the sides, and the fists clenched against the thighs, just as in Egyptian portrait statues. These poorly proportioned, stiff imitations gradually developed into the beautiful naturalistic Greek sculptures of classical times.

Other important Near Eastern architectural achievements include the development of bridges, fortifications, aqueducts, concrete, sanitary systems, and both corbelled and true arches and vaults as well as domes. Arches and vaults are especially important developments. They support more weight and allow more open space beneath them than the post-and-lintel construction used in most Greek structures. The Etruscans borrowed these Near Eastern architectural elements and passed them on to the Romans. Roman architecture utilized the true arch, barrel vaults, and cross-barrel vaults to create huge structures such as aqueducts and the Colosseum and to open up large interior spaces within their public baths and palaces. Roman domed buildings, like the second-century CE Pantheon, provided the inspiration for many later structures: churches, mosques, and even U.S. public buildings such as the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Religion and Speculative Thought

The preceding sections of this chapter describe significant contributions of the ancient Near East to modern civilization, but with the exception of writing, the Near East’s greatest impact, by far, has been in the realm of religion and speculative thought. The Near East produced the three great monotheistic faiths of modern times—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and the roots of all three go back into antiquity. As we have seen, Judaism was in part a product of its ancient Near Eastern environment, being influenced by the concepts, stories, and practices of other cultures, especially those of Mesopotamia and Canaan. However, by the early part of the sixth century BCE, Judeans had come to believe that there was only one god and that he controlled the entire universe (see [Chapter 13](#)). Zoroaster’s religion seems to have strongly influenced this monotheism during the Persian Period, and the resulting

eschatological Judaism of late Persian and Hellenistic times, in turn, gave rise to Rabbinic Judaism and to Christianity (see [Chapter 13](#)).

Though Islam did not come into being until the seventh century CE, during the Western medieval period, Muhammad and his followers recognized the continuity between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Muhammad believed that the God whose revelations he experienced was the same god worshipped by Jews and Christians. Muslims believe Muhammad's revelations to be the last, most complete and perfect ones delivered to humans by God, but they do not deny that he had given earlier revelations to Abraham (traditionally regarded as the father of both Jews and Arabs), Moses, and Jesus. Today, the majority of the world's population either practices one of these three religions or exists in a culture that has been largely influenced by one or more of them.

Finally, it has been customary to associate a logical, rational approach to the world with the Greeks and a mythopoeic ("myth-making") view that understands the world only through myth or religion with the earlier Near Eastern civilizations. While there is some truth to this distinction, it has often been overemphasized and made too absolute. Most Greeks and Romans retained mythopoeic thought patterns long after the development of Greek philosophy and its offshoot, science—for that matter, so do modern Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other believers in revealed truth. Even Greek philosophers did not totally abandon myth in their quest to understand the world. "All things are full of gods" is one of the only statements attributed to Thales of Miletus, the first Greek philosopher, who seems to have used the concept of a world-soul to explain change and motion (Cornford 1957: 127–129). Other pre-Socratic philosophers saw strife or attraction and repulsion as the means by which the world came into being and functioned, ideas that may have developed from contact with Zoroastrian dualism. Even Plato used myths in many of his dialogues to introduce concepts that could not be presented otherwise. On the other hand, while the people of the ancient Near East usually explained the world in terms of myth, they could also be logical and rational in their approach to individual problems. Their rationality is reflected in the ways they organized and made lists of various materials and subjects. Additionally, their scientific observations of the motion of heavenly bodies, the rise of the Nile and other natural events, and their logical approach to mathematics and engineering provided the foundation upon which Greeks could construct their theories and generalizations. In the end, the two often opposing forces in modern thought—logic and science on the one hand, and religions that rely on revealed truth on the other—are both rooted in the ancient Near East, the cradle of Western civilization.

The Future for the Near East's Past

The cultural heritage of the ancient Near East is currently under threat as it has never been before. ISIS' highly public demolitions of pre-Islamic (and Islamic) sites and monuments in Iraq and Syria have erased forever some of the storied places of this "cradle of civilization." Besides this cultural "genocide" (Ghorashi 2015), the history of this region is threatened by a variety of other factors as well. The most perfidious is the systematic looting of archaeological sites across the region and the market forces that incentivize this destruction. Yet we must also be aware that modernization and development underway in many regions (the clearing of tells for fields, major dam projects, and regular construction at ancient sites) can be equally damaging.

What is most urgently needed in the Near East is a return to stability and security. Yet even in the current political climate where many areas are no longer open to excavations or study (all of Syria, parts of Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), international excavation projects have resumed in areas of Iraq, such as the Kurdistan region of the north and even at Ur in the far south. In the meantime, various international organizations have been set up to track heritage destruction and looting, to digitally document sites and artifacts, and to share strategic conservation knowledge to those working at threatened sites. The best thing we can do to save our combined heritage is to educate people on its importance so that they will act as stewards of their past. We must safeguard the past for future generations, for who knows what we will discover about our heritage and about ourselves.

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Glossary

Absolute chronology A dating system in which years are counted forward and backward from a specific event. The absolute chronology used in the West is based on the supposed year when Jesus of Nazareth was born.

Akh The Egyptian term for a transfigured or glorified spirit of light in the afterlife. A person who through burial rites is transformed into an *akh* is an effective being in the other world just as he or she was in this one. The word also was used to describe a son who performed rites to transform his dead father into a blessed spirit or for a person who performed pious rites for the good of the gods.

Akhet Normally translated “horizon,” this Egyptian word means much more. It is the home of light located between the horizon and the underworld, and the place where a dead person becomes an *akh*, a potent inhabitant of the world beyond death. Each day, the sun is transformed this way as it rises and sets.

Akkadian A term used for the dynasty of Sargon of Akkad and its era, and for the Semitic language of ancient Mesopotamia that Sargon spoke. The principal dialects of the Akkadian language were Babylonian and Assyrian.

Amarna The modern name for the location of the Egyptian king Akhenaton’s capital city, Akhetaton (“Horizon of the Aton,” or better, “Place Where the Aton is Transformed”). As an adjective, it refers to anything having to do with the reign of Akhenaton and his immediate successors.

Amarna Letters A collection of letters written in Akkadian on clay tablets found in the ruins of Akhenaton’s city at El-Amarna in central Egypt. These documents are correspondence to the Egyptian pharaoh from the rulers of other major powers and from vassal rulers of city-states in Syria and Palestine. Most of the letters belong to the reign of Akhenaton, but a few come from the last years of Amenhotep III, and a few may extend into the reign of Tutankhamun.

Amorites People speaking a West Semitic language who originally seem to have been seminomads settled primarily in southern Syria along the western fringes of Mesopotamia. Around 2200–2000 BCE large numbers of them moved into Mesopotamia, western Syria, and Palestine.

Anatolia A term that originally referred to the central highlands of Turkey,

but it is also often used more broadly as a synonym for Asia Minor or the entire Asiatic portion of the modern Republic of Turkey.

Arabah The valley that runs from the southern end of the Dead Sea to the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba.

Artifact Anything that has been made, altered, or used by humans or which owes its position in space to humans.

Aryans This is the native Iranian and Indian (Vedic) term the Indo-European speakers who invaded Iran and India after (or, some would say, in conjunction with) the collapse of the Indus civilization applied to themselves. In fact, it is the source of the place name “Iran” which means “land of the Aryans.” The Achaemenid Persians also used it to refer to their language and script. Like “Indo-European,” today it is a linguistic term, not a racial or ethnic one, despite its misuse by racists from the nineteenth century CE to today.

Asia Minor The large peninsula that is the Asiatic part of modern Turkey. It is bounded on the north by the Black Sea, on the west by the Bosphorus, Sea of Marmora, Dardanelles, and Aegean Sea, and on the south by the Mediterranean Sea.

Assemblage In archaeology, this term designates a group of objects found in association with one another and believed to be of the same date and to belong to one group of people.

Ba In Egyptian belief, a spiritual element of a person that expressed his personality and power. After death, the *ba* could move about freely, even beyond the tomb.

Bullae Hollow clay balls in which clay tokens were sealed for record-keeping purposes before writing was invented. Impressions corresponding to the shapes and number of the tokens they contained were usually placed on their outer surfaces.

C. An abbreviation for the Latin word *circa* meaning “about” or “approximately.”

Carbon-14 dating See **Radiocarbon dating**.

Cartouche An oval design surrounding each of the last two of the five names of Egyptian pharaohs. Cartouches were also sometimes placed around the names of queens and gods.

Cataract A term used for a place in a river (especially in the Nile) where there are rapids or small waterfalls.

Coregency A period when two rulers shared the throne. Coregencies were often utilized during the Egyptian Middle and New Kingdoms. When a pharaoh was growing old or feeble he might name someone (usually his son) as coregent (or co-ruler) to help maintain control and make the succession easier.

Corvée A term (derived from pre-revolutionary France) that refers to temporary forced labor which citizens had to perform for the state. Corvée labor was used to build most ancient Near Eastern monuments such as Mesopotamian ziggurats or Egyptian pyramids.

Cosmology Stories and/or ideas relating to the structure and origins of the universe.

Cuneiform A writing system consisting of signs composed of “wedge-shaped” elements. It was first developed in southern Mesopotamia probably to write Sumerian, but it was adapted to write other languages as well, including Akkadian, Elamite, Hittite, and Persian. It was generally written on clay tablets, but could be carved into stone, as well.

Cylinder seal A carved or engraved small stone or metal cylinder that was rolled over wet clay to leave an impression of its design. It was usually used in place of a signature on documents or to indicate ownership of objects.

Dendrochronology Tree-ring dating. By comparing groups of wide and narrow tree rings, scholars have been able to connect modern sequences of rings with those in old stumps and even older logs and beams to create a tree-ring sequence that stretches back more than 6,000 years. Radiocarbon testing of tree rings firmly dated by dendrochronology has helped improve the accuracy of radiocarbon dating.

Determinatives “Silent” signs in ancient cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems that were meant to clarify the meaning of a word, often by indicating its category (“god,” “man,” “wooden object,” “action verb,” etc.).

Deutero-Isaiah A Judean prophet from the time of the Babylonian Exile whose real name is unknown. His prophecies were added to the Book of Isaiah, forming the second part of the book (chapters 40–55), so scholars call him Deutero- or “Second” Isaiah.

Deuteronomistic History This work of biblical historiography by an unknown author consists of the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, plus a narrative bridge connecting the book of Deuteronomy to its beginning. It was inspired by the book of Deuteronomy and evaluates Judean and Israelite rulers by how well or poorly they followed the commands laid down in Deuteronomy, especially those forbidding worship of other gods and prohibiting sacrifice anywhere but in the Jerusalem Temple.

Divination The act of determining a god’s will by interpreting omens or signs (such as lightning flashes in the sky, directions of flights of birds, folds in an animal’s liver, etc.).

Dry Farming Farming that is dependent upon rainfall alone to water the crops.

Dynasty A succession of rulers from the same bloodline or family. This term can also be used for the period during which one such family ruled (as is often true for references in Egyptian history).

El-Amarna See **Amarna**.

Electrum An alloy of gold and silver that was highly prized in antiquity. It was harder and stronger than pure gold.

Eponym An official chosen each year to give his name to the year. In some places lists of eponyms served as points of reference for determining the chronology of events.

Eschatology Doctrines or teachings about “the End” or “Final Things” (*eschaton* in Greek). These teachings usually include concepts of the end of this world and an afterlife in a world to come.

Eunuch A castrated male. In the ancient Near East, eunuchs usually served as harem attendants or palace officials.

Hatti The designation generally used by ancient Near Eastern peoples for both the Hittite kingdom and the Hittite people. Scholars use it today primarily for the Hittite territory in central Anatolia around Hattusas and also as a designation for the entire Hittite Empire.

Heb-sed An Egyptian rite usually translated “Jubilee Festival.” It was usually celebrated by a pharaoh after he had been on the throne for thirty years. It renewed his vitality and magically repeated both the creation of the world and pharaoh’s enthronement as ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Henotheism Worship of or emphasis on one god without denying the existence of other deities.

Hieroglyphic A writing system developed in Egypt that primarily uses pictures of objects as its signs for words or sounds. This term is also applied to other forms of picture-like writing, such as that which the Hittites developed in Asia Minor.

Hittites Speakers of an Indo-European language who occupied the area around Hattusa in Anatolia until c. 1200 BCE. They conquered most of Asia Minor and their kingdom was a major rival of the Egyptian New Kingdom.

Horus An Egyptian solar deity, often depicted as a falcon or a falcon-headed man. In Egyptian myth, Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, defeated his evil uncle Seth and became king of Egypt. This myth was used to explain the divine nature of Egyptian kingship. Every pharaoh became the embodiment of Horus when he ascended to the throne of Egypt, and he became Osiris when he died.

Horus name The first of five names usually used by ancient Egyptian rulers. It presented the pharaoh as the earthly incarnation of Horus and the legitimate ruler of Egypt.

Hurrians A people who spoke a non-Semitic and non-Indo-European language

that probably originated in the mountains near Lake Van. They occupied much of northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia and established the Kingdom of Mitanni.

Hypostyle hall A colonnaded roofed room, usually quite large. In Egypt a hypostyle hall stood between an open court and the main shrine in a temple. The papyrus and lotus-shaped columns represented the plants of the primeval marsh from which the first mound of earth (the higher land under the temple's shrine), the source of all creation, had emerged. Large colonnaded halls were also used in Persian architecture.

Incipient cultivation A term used for the practice of saving and planting seeds of wild plants that once had been simply gathered and consumed. It is thought that this practice preceded and led to the domestication of plants in the Near East.

Incipient herding This term is used for the assumed practice of driving groups of wild animals into pens and keeping many of them there for some time before killing and eating them. It is thought that people selected the young to eat, thus allowing the older animals to breed in captivity. The familiarity between humans and animals resulting from this practice may have led to domestication of animals.

Indo-European A designation for a family of languages that includes Vedic, Sanskrit, Hindi (and many other languages of India), Persian (and other Iranian languages), and Hittite (and several other ancient languages of Asia Minor), as well as the various groups of European languages. It is a linguistic, not a racial or ethnic, term.

Inundation The term used for a Nile flood in Egypt. It also denoted a season in the Egyptian calendar: the time when the Nile was in flood, usually July through October.

Isis A major Egyptian goddess that was the wife of Osiris and mother of Horus. She supposedly made the first mummy (of her husband after he was killed by Seth) and used her magic to restore Osiris to life. She was embodied in the throne of Egypt, and every pharaoh became her son Horus when he sat on the throne during his coronation ceremony.

Ka In Egyptian thought, the "life-force" or "animating spirit" of an individual. The *ka* was an individual's spiritual double that gave his body motion and vitality.

Karum An Akkadian word that meant "quay, port, commercial district" in the topographical sense. *Karum* also was used in an institutional sense for an association of traders, a kind of board of trade with administrative powers to handle the internal affairs of the merchants and serve as a liaison with local authorities. The activities of the Old Assyrian *karum* at Kanesh in Anatolia is well-known because of the approximately 23,000 tablets found

there.

Kassites A people who may have originated in the central Zagros Mountains east of Mesopotamia. They conquered Babylon c. 1595 BCE, establishing a dynasty that ruled Baby-lonia (or Karduniash as they called it) for slightly more than four centuries, longer than any other dynasty in Mesopotamian history. They originally spoke a language that does not belong to any known linguistic family, but they adopted the use of Akkadian after settling in Babylonia.

Kush The name for the area and kingdom on the Nile in Nubia, south of the second cataract from the Middle Kingdom through the Late Period. Kings from this area ruled Egypt as the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty.

Lapis lazuli A beautiful royal-blue stone found mainly in Afghanistan. It was the most desired “precious” stone in the ancient Near East and was used for jewelry and decorative inlay, especially in Mesopotamia.

Levant A term for the Mediterranean’s eastern coastal region between Egypt and Turkey. This geographical area comprises Syria west of the Euphrates River, Lebanon, Israel, and western Jordan. The word comes from the French term *soleil levant*, “the rising sun.” In medieval times, it was used for all areas east of Italy, but it gradually became restricted to the region indicated here.

Limmu An official in Assyria who gave his name to the year and probably conducted religious rites as well. There was a different *limmu* for each year, and lists of these officials (often called eponym lists) formed a chronology for Assyria. The lists of these officials proved very valuable for reconstructing the ancient Near Eastern chronology, because knowing the name of the *limmu* for the year when a solar eclipse took place (763 BCE) allowed scholars to determine absolute dates for Assyrian rulers back to 910 BCE.

Logogram A written sign or symbol that represents a complete word. Logograms include both pictograms (signs representing physical objects) and ideograms (signs representing ideas, concepts, or non-physical entities). The use of logograms in texts is called logo-graphic writing.

Lower Egypt The Nile Delta area north of Cairo. The term derives from the flat (low) terrain where the Nile enters the Mediterranean.

Ma‘at The ancient Egyptian word for “truth, order, balance, harmony,” that is, “everything in its rightful place.” The Egyptians personalized *Ma‘at* as a goddess, the daughter of Re, maintained and supported by pharaoh and the other deities.

Magi Probably members of a special priestly tribe or class among the Medes who eventually became the priestly class within Mazdaism and later forms of the Zoroastrian religion.

Mail A type of body armor, usually a shirt, made either of small interlocked metal rings or overlapping metal plates.

Maryannu A term used for trained chariot warriors in the Near East during the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1150 BCE). It was once thought to be of Indo-European (more specifically, Indo-Iranian) origin, but now it is recognized as a term derived from Hurrian.

Matriarchy Literally, “mother-rule.” This term is applied to a society or family dominated or ruled by a woman or women.

Mazdaism A term many scholars use for the Iranian religion practiced in the Achaemenid Persian Period (probably a form of the religion of Zoroaster) to distinguish it from “Zoroastrianism,” the somewhat different form of the religion practiced in Sasanian times and later. Some individuals, though, prefer to use the term “Zoroastrianism” for all phases of the religion from Zoroaster to the present.

Mazdian A term many scholars use for an Achaemenid era worshipper of Ahura Mazda, the good god whose veneration was promoted by Zoroaster. Others use “Zoroastrian” for a supporter of Zoroaster’s god regardless of the historical period in question.

Me In Mesopotamia, this was a set of rules or regulations assigned to every activity, office, institution, piece of equipment, and even each attitude and belief that allowed the gods’ perfect plan or design for that entity to be implemented or realized in the world.

Mesopotamia Greek for “between the rivers.” This name is used for the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys and the region between them, essentially modern-day Iraq and eastern Syria.

Mitanni (or, more correctly, Mittani) This predominantly Hurrian kingdom in western Syria and southeastern Anatolia expanded into northern Mesopotamia and western Syria in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries and became a major rival of the Egyptian and Hittite Empires.

Nebty name The “two Ladies” name of an Egyptian pharaoh. It was usually the second of five names used by a king and represented him as the embodiment of the patron goddesses (the “two Ladies”) of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Negev The dry southern part of Palestine that stretched from just north of Beersheba to the Gulf of Aqaba and the desert of Sinai on the south. This word is also sometimes written Negeb.

New Year Festival A spring celebration held annually in Mesopotamia during which it was believed that the gods established the destinies of individuals and states for the coming year. This festival also came to include the originally separate *Akiti* or *Akitu* agricultural celebrations and the Sacred Marriage ceremony in which the ruler “wed” the fertility goddess to

guarantee fruitfulness to the land and its people. In first millennium celebrations of the New Year Festival, the Epic of Creation was recited (and perhaps acted out) to ensure that the gods would continue to triumph over chaos, and the king underwent rites of atonement for himself and his people. The Persians later adopted this festival, and it may have influenced rites connected with the Israelite Day of Atonement and rabbinic interpretations of the Jewish New Year celebration.

Nomarch The administrator or governor of a nome or district of Egypt.

Nome One of the traditional administrative districts of ancient Egypt. There were twenty-two nomes in Upper Egypt and twenty nomes in Lower Egypt.

Nomen The final name (of five) used by ancient Egyptian pharaohs, and generally the one used by modern scholars (Thutmose, Amenhotep, Ramesses, etc.). It was usually the name a pharaoh had received at birth.

Nubia The part of the Nile valley south of the First Cataract. It was divided into Lower Nubia (from the First to the Second Cataract) and Upper Nubia (from the Second Cataract southward into the Sudan). During the Middle and New Kingdoms, Upper Nubia was called Kush.

Obsidian A shiny dark green to black natural glass produced during volcanic eruptions. It was a desirable trade object and came primarily from Anatolia.

Omen A phenomenon or occurrence regarded as a sign or message sent by a deity.

Osiris Egyptian god of the dead. In Egyptian myth, he was the first king of Egypt who was killed by his brother Seth. His wife Isis mummified his remains and brought him back to life, whereupon he became god of the dead. He and Isis then had a son, Horus, who avenged his father and became king of Egypt.

Pantheon Collectively, all of the deities worshipped by a given culture or nation.

Patriarchy Literally, “father-rule.” This term is applied to a family ruled by its leading (usually its oldest) male or to a society dominated or ruled by men.

Pentateuch A term used by biblical scholars for the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). It is called the *Torah* in Hebrew.

Pharaoh A title for kings of Egypt derived from the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew term was an attempt to reproduce the Egyptian word *per'o* (or *per'aa*), which meant “great house.” This word was originally a term for the royal palace, but during the Eighteenth Dynasty it came to be used to refer to the king himself.

Phonograms Written symbols that represent *sounds* rather than individual

words. Alphabetic characters are phonograms, but so also were many of the signs used in ancient cuneiform writing systems. Cuneiform phonograms usually represented syllables rather than single consonant or single vowel sounds.

Pictograph Literally, “picture writing.” See **Logogram**.

Pottery sherds or potsherds. See **Sherds**.

Praenomen The fourth of five names an Egyptian pharaoh assumed upon ascending to the throne. It was preceded by the title usually rendered “King of Upper and Lower Egypt.” A pharaoh’s praenomen and nomen were usually written in oval symbols called car-touches. If an ancient text or inscription referred to a pharaoh by only one name, it was usually the praenomen that was used.

Pylon The Greek word for “gate.” It is used for the fortress-like gateways of Egyptian temples.

Radiocarbon dating A dating method that indicates how long organic matter has been dead by measuring its ratio of radioactive carbon (^{14}C or carbon-14) to normal carbon. This dating method can provide at least general absolute dates for organic objects up to about 70,000 years old. However, the ratio of carbon-14 to normal carbon has varied over time. So, today scientists use charts based on radiocarbon testing of tree rings that are firmly dated by dendrochronology to correct radiocarbon dates to more accurately reflect the true age of tested objects up to about 6,000 years old.

Redistributive economy A managed economic system in which a central institution (such as a temple or government) controls all or most of the society’s production, collecting it and redistributing it to the society’s members.

Relative chronology A method of dating things in relation to one another: event “B” took place before event “C,” but after event “A.” Such dating is used when fixed or absolute dates are not known. Relative chronologies can be derived from many sources, including archaeology and texts such as king lists.

Satrap The governor of a major division of the Persian Empire.

Satrapy One of the major divisions of the Persian Empire. Under Darius I, there were twenty satrapies, but the number increased in later times.

Scarab An Egyptian amulet carved in the shape of a scarab beetle (also known as a dung beetle). Egyptian scarabs usually had inscriptions on their flat undersides.

Sed Festival See **Heb-sed**.

Semitic A designation for a group of languages that includes Akkadian (ancient Babylonian and Assyrian), Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and many other languages, both ancient and modern. It is a linguistic term, not a

racial or ethnic one. Semitic languages are part of the larger Afro-Asiatic family.

Shabti An Egyptian magical burial figurine (also known as an *ushabti* or *shawabti*). From the Middle Kingdom onward, Egyptians deposited such figurines in tombs to magically perform work in the afterlife in place of the dead.

Sherds (or shards) Pieces of broken pottery vessels. They are the most common remains at most Near Eastern archaeological sites. Archaeologists usually use pottery sherds to identify and date the individual layers of archaeological sites and as characteristic objects for distinguishing many ancient cultures.

Stele (plural, *stelae*) An upright commemorative stone slab with at least one inscribed and/or sculptured surface.

Stratigraphy The study of the sequence of layers (*strata*) uncovered by archaeological excavation. Stratigraphical analysis produces a relative chronology of the material in question.

Syllabogram A written sign that represents a syllable. Rather than an alphabet, several Near Eastern writing systems used a combination of logograms and syllabograms, often including **determinatives**.

Syllabographic writing A writing system like Mesopotamian cuneiform in which phono-grams represent syllables rather than individual consonants or vowels.

Tell el-Amarna See **Amarna**.

Tokens Small, various-shaped pieces of clay (mostly cones, disks, spheres, and other geometrical shapes) to represent some commodities and numbers before the existence of writing. The use of clay tokens spread over much of the Near East from the sixth through the fourth millennia BCE. Some think they helped give rise to cuneiform writing in Mesopotamia and Elam.

Torah "Instruction" or "Law" in Hebrew. The term used for the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (which are also sometimes called the Pentateuch).

Upper Egypt The portion of the Nile valley from the first cataract to the beginning of the Delta around modern Cairo. Since the Nile River flows from south to north, this term derives from the higher (upper) terrain from which the Nile flows.

Uraeus An image of a rearing cobra worn on the brow of an Egyptian pharaoh. It was thought to magically protect him from enemies.

Ushabti See **Shabti**.

Vizier An Ottoman Turkish title adopted by scholars of the Near East to refer to someone in the position of a primary advisor or prime minister to a king.

Votive objects Statues, weapons, or other objects dedicated to a deity or

deities in fulfillment of a vow or as an act of worship. Such objects were usually placed in shrines or temples or ceremonially buried.

Yahweh The personal name of the god of Israel and Judah, written with just the consonants equivalent to YHWH. Yahweh was probably originally a creator god whose name derived from the causative form of the Hebrew verb for “to be.” It probably meant “He brings into being [all that exists].”

Zagros Mountains A mountain range just to the east of Mesopotamia. It is located in present-day western Iran and northeastern Iraq.

Ziggurat An Anglicized form of the Akkadian *ziqurratu*, the term for a high platform with several stages or levels, like a stepped pyramid, on top of which major Mesopotamian temples were built. The word is also sometimes written ziqqurat.

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